

# Naturalness as a safe haven: parental consumption practices and the management of risk

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *This paper aims to present an analysis of the various dimensions of naturalness that shape the consumption practices of parents with young children.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The study builds on semi-structured interviews with 17 mothers and fathers focusing on parental decision-making in everyday consumption from pregnancy to the first years of the child's life.*

**Findings** – *Naturalness is a tool allowing parents to navigate in a world of risks and part of an everyday consumption practice that constructs and maintains children as vulnerable and parents as responsible. Parents perceive naturalness as something with three dimensions: familiarity, purity and culture. These three dimensions lead to different parental practices around consumption.*

**Originality/value** – *The analysis contributes to the authors' understanding of parenting, childhood, risk, safety and consumption by showing how and why parents of young children construct naturalness as a three-dimensional ideal in their consumption practices.*

**Keywords** *Safety, Risk, Childhood, Naturalness, Parental consumption practices, Purity*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

Risk is a key theme in the sociology of consumption, as it is seen as a central feature of contemporary Western society (Halkier, 2010). Risk is especially prominent in what we shall call “parental consumption practices”, i.e. parental patterns of consumption choices. The sociological research within this field has shown that parents are held responsible for – and indeed, hold themselves responsible for – all of the choices they make on behalf of their children (Lupton, 2011). Children's health is here often in focus, and analyses show that often health is viewed as the result of good or bad parenting (Lupton, 2011). It follows that parenting requires ongoing reflexivity about how best to care for the child and take appropriate steps to minimize potential risks. Thus, sociological studies have established that competent parenthood today requires increased engagement in ongoing normative reflection on all decisions made in relation to parental consumption (Martens *et al.*, 2004; Martens, 2014).

What is less well-understood is how parents navigate within this world of increased parental responsibility and in a risk-full world of consumption. In the area of food consumption, theories highlight the role of cultural rules and taxonomies for establishing cuisines, i.e. relatively stable structuring principles for food practices. Through cultural rules which combine time, place and product, and through taxonomies which categorize items and products, principles of exclusion and inclusion help establish order in a world of risk and uncertainty (Fischler, 1988) of everyday life practices around food suggest that such rules and taxonomies are adapted in ordinary consumption and made into personal (food)

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systems, offering heuristics helping people to manage the complexity of consumption choices to be made (Connors *et al.*, 2001). Question is whether similar rules and taxonomies are in play in the broader realm of risk and parental consumption? This is the topic we address in this paper.

The conception of the young child as vulnerable to risk is constructed and maintained through consumption and health-care practices among parents with young children (Cairns *et al.*, 2013). Such an understanding of parenting and children's health both invite a world of commercial products that help parents to safeguard and surveil their children to minimize hazards but lead to increased parental attention to safety concerns. For example, Martens (2014) shows how the identification of the chemical BPA as dangerous to babies is one of many new safety concerns that parents of today must be aware of not only when purchasing new products but also when using a product that may have been regarded as safe just a few years ago. Lupton shows how pregnant women and mothers of infants are highly concerned about their maternal responsibility and apply various strategies in protecting their fetuses' and infants' health, denying themselves ordinary pleasures such as coffee, ice cream, alcohol or chocolate, as such pleasures make them feel guilty (Lupton, 2011; Lupton, 2013). These studies all seek to demonstrate how consumption practices shape, and are shaped by, contemporary cultural understandings of maternal responsibility and of young infants and children as vulnerable.

Our study sets off from these findings and adds to them by analyzing concepts which are evoked in parental consumption strategies. Centre of interest is the concept of naturalness which in our data material repeatedly was brought forward by parents when explaining how they seek to embrace the cultural imperatives of parental responsibility for handling risk. Overall, we argue that parents manage to navigate normativity, consumption choices and risk by resorting to the notion of "naturalness as a safe haven". We show how naturalness is an efficient tool for managing consumption choices because it eliminates many options (i.e. by and large, products which are not perceived as natural), while, at least in principle, shielding children from the harm that may be caused by non-natural ingredients and ingredients that are perceived as harmful. We use the term "naturalness as a safe haven" with a twofold aim. First, we want to capture how parents rely on naturalness as an ideal in their consumption strategies. Second, we want to show how this ideal reinforces an understanding of the child as fragile and of parents as individually responsible for upholding the ideal of the "natural child" through "natural" consumption practices. The consumer appeal of natural products is a central issue within studies of food safety and biotechnology (e.g. Dickson-Spillmann *et al.*, 2009). While researchers disagree over the meaning people ascribe to the concept, they do agree that people regard naturalness as something inherently positive (Rozin, 2005; Rozin *et al.*, 2004). The positive connotations of the word "natural" are probably also the reason why it is a popular marketing strategy to label products as natural (Amos *et al.*, 2014). Research has found that people tend to decide on a product's naturalness by looking at the degree of human intervention in the production process and whether the product includes artificial substances. Products labelled natural are seen as safer, and less contaminated, than non-natural alternatives (Amos *et al.*, 2014; Dickson-Spillmann *et al.*, 2011). Although research also shows that consumers express confusion about what the term all-natural actually includes (Abrams *et al.*, 2010), Rozin *et al.* (2004) categorize people's preferences for naturalness into two types of personal view: an instrumental view and an ideational view. The instrumental view refers to the way people assume that naturalness has a functional superiority over what is perceived as non-natural. For example, natural remedies are believed by some to improve one's health and be safer to consume. The ideational view, by contrast, is based on the belief that natural products are morally or aesthetically superior (Rozin *et al.*, 2004; Rozin *et al.*, 2012). Thus, natural meat pies may be viewed as a morally superior choice in relation to animal welfare or taste.

While existing research points to the associations that people connect with naturalness, we lack an understanding of how such associations operate in the context of the family. One study that addresses this research gap finds that consumption of natural food products is closely related to the mothers' identities as both protector and nurturer. To purchase food products with the label natural confirms the mothers in their belief that they are making the right choice and that they are good, caring mothers (Moscato and Machin, 2018). While this study improves our knowledge of how food, naturalness and identities relate, the voice of the fathers is missing. Today men are increasingly involved in caring practices especially in the Nordic countries where the state supports involved fatherhood (Bach, 2015). This paper expands some of the points raised by Moscato and Machin (2018), but focuses on both men and women, and further discusses how the concept of naturalness may be applicable to child-related consumption in general and not only consumption of food products. Finally, this study adds to the existing literature by using Douglas' theory on purity and danger to discuss how naturalness represents a purification strategy that upholds social order by maintaining the preciousness of the baby.

The paper proceeds as follows: in the next section, we present methods and data, and then we present the findings. The findings of the study are departed into two overall sections; first we show how parental consumption decisions, guided by naturalness, are related to narratives of childhood, parenting and risks. Second, we show how, in their decision-making, parents refer to different dimensions of naturalness.

## Methods

This article draws on data from a larger research study investigating parental perceptions of probiotics for young children (Author *et al.*, 2018). Originally, naturalness was not a theme within this study, but during the interviews, the concept of naturalness was spontaneously brought up by the informants repeatedly and in very different contexts. The concept appeared in discussions of birth, in participants' thoughts on dietary supplements and house buying, and in relation to the consumption of everything, from child safety seats to toys. On this basis, we decided to conduct a second analysis of the interviews focusing on the concept of naturalness.

In total, we interviewed 17 parents of young children (age 8-18 months), 12 mothers and 5 fathers. We recruited through a combination of snowballing and network contacts. The first author contacted four people in her network living in different regions of Denmark (Zealand, Funen and Jutland). These gatekeepers were then asked to contact people in their network living in the same geographical area who met the inclusion criteria (at least one child at the age of 8-18 months).

The sample includes parents with different levels of education: four with higher education, nine with a bachelor's or equivalent degree, three with vocational education and one with elementary school. The parents were aged between 28 and 44 years at the time of the interview. The families lived in different areas of Denmark. Ten families lived in smaller towns and rural areas and five families lived within the areas of the two largest Danish cities: Copenhagen and Aarhus. All parents were co-habitants and all were of Danish origin.

The semi-structured interview guide adopted a chronological approach: interviewees first discussed health-related practices during pregnancy and answered questions about changes in their consumption habits and dietary routines, and whether they had experienced worries about the baby's health and well-being during pregnancy. The discussion then moved on to the interviewees' experiences of the birth of their children, and the first few months following birth, focusing on among other things the parents' thoughts about breastfeeding, how they experienced the complementary feeding period and everyday routines in relation to consumption.

All interviews took place in the participants' homes, and all of the interviews except two were of a single individual. In the other two interviews, a second parent made contributions to the interview from its beginning. The interviewer therefore decided to formally invite these second parents to participate fully in the interview. These interviews with couples were valuable in allowing us to understand how parents negotiate consumption and naturalness.

Our analysis involved several steps. First, all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The first author then listened through each of the interviews to understand individual stories in their entirety. She then read all of the transcripts through, taking longhand notes, to get a sense of the important themes. Then she read the transcripts again and wrote a short summary of each of the interviews using the preliminary themes as a way of structuring the summary. The transcripts were also coded in Nvivo using a thematic approach. This helped us to identify similarities and differences across the interviews, and the more structured and detailed coding process allowed us to see, for example, whether new themes had emerged that had not surfaced in the first analytical steps. The coding also made it possible to see if, and where, themes were somehow related, and whether the themes were as important as we had thought they were during the earlier reading. Overall, the combination of manual coding and coding in Nvivo provided us with both a broad overview and more detailed, nuanced insights into our data.

Some of the empirical material discussed in this paper is discussed in another paper (Author *et al.*, 2017). Whereas the other paper deals with parental perceptions specifically of probiotics, this one focuses more generally on parental consumption, and children, in relation to risk, and on the various dimensions of naturalness that parents bring to bear in their thinking and decision-making.

## Findings

### *Parental consumption as a risk-related practice*

Overall, the interviews with parents show how they understand consumption as a risk-related practice. Risk permeates parental reflection on the purchase of all manner of goods, from car seats, to foods and toys. When Anne, for example, buys products for her two girls, she carefully reads product labels or surfs the internet for tests of product variants to be absolutely sure that what she buys does not contain any harmful chemicals and is completely safe to use:

I will simply go to [the Internet] and check up on everything. And here [in reviews and test results on the Internet] it also says if the child safety seat is filled with chemicals, because I think when they sit there for a little while, they are likely to start to grumble in the seat and then I think you might as well think about the chemicals.

The other interviewees described strategies similar to Anne's. For example, Sandra was worried about the side effects of having her son vaccinated. However, she was also worried about the consequences of not giving him the vaccine, and she ended up accepting the vaccine although she still felt uncertain about its safety:

Sandra: So, I remember the first time I had to vaccinate Silas. I actually asked the doctor: Is it really a good idea to vaccinate children? And then we had this long talk about it, and he was really fair. He said: I'm a doctor, and I've vaccinated my three kids. But he is in the medical world, and works with pharma, where I'm more ambivalent about vaccines.

Interviewer: Yes, why?

Sandra: Well, it is because they contain aluminum, for example. You inject poisonous aluminum directly into the body. I don't like that. Because that might have some negative consequences later in life.

Although Sandra thinks her doctor is reasonable and fair, she ends up concluding that with his background, he cannot be objective about vaccines, as his profession is linked to the pharmaceutical industry. Hence, she remains skeptical about the vaccine.

While all of the parents interviewed had followed the Danish childhood vaccination program and had their children vaccinated, some of them expressed ambivalence about vaccines that were similar to Sandra's. They had carefully read up on the potential side effects and discussed what they had read with their partners. In a society, where new research results and novel technologies constantly intrude everyday life, bringing with them new and conflicting messages, people do not simply accept new scientific messages. Science is no longer a taken for granted as an authority and today's parents engage more actively with risks – as illustrated by Sandra's reluctance to accept the national guidelines on vaccines (Giddens, 1999).

The parents we interviewed expressed other worries. Some said they always read product labels to avoid E-numbers, additives and synthetic chemicals in food for their children. And several chose to buy as much organically produced products as possible. For these parents, organic consumption mostly involves food products, but some parents also buy organically produced clothes and toys. Often, this motivation to buy organic products begins at pregnancy. The parents described the motivation as one that was mainly based on beliefs about health; they assumed that organic products contain fewer harmful ingredients. Research shows how consumers' understandings of organic products, and their perceptions of naturalness, share some of the same elements. Both are thought to be free of chemicals, and to be healthier than conventionally produced foods (Grankvist and Biel, 2001).

### *Naturalness as a harm reduction strategy*

In a "risk society", people have an increased sense of their own responsibility for managing risk. One way for individuals to manage risks is to apply what Nichter and Thompson describe as a harm reduction strategy – a strategy that entails a lifestyle or behavior, adopted with the purpose of controlling or reducing risks in one's environment (Nichter and Thompson, 2006). Applying naturalness as a guideline in consumption practices is an example of such a harm reduction strategy. Cecilia and Bobby, a couple, and parents of an 18-month-old son, disagreed over whether they should provide a dietary supplement for their son. They did agree, however, that the question for them was whether supplements are natural:

Cecilia: Bobby doesn't feel the same way as I do when it comes to supplements because it's not something that is natural, it is not a piece of broccoli. So, when we deal with something that is not a piece of broccoli, or something like that, then I think that you [Bobby] start to think like this: Why should he [son] have it this way, right?

Bobby: Yes. For example, when it comes to Vitamin D drops, then I think it is more natural if he was out in the sun. So yes, basically that's the way I feel, yes.

Although Bobby thinks that supplements are redundant, they do actually provide their son with supplements, underlining how such child-related consumption choices follow the mother's opinion. The example also points to how naturalness is associated with things that are safe to consume. It is a means by which one can distinguish safe products from unsafe ones. In the exchange, Bobby defines naturalness by physical appearance and draws a rather simple line between natural and non-natural products: according to this logic, he would be able to decide on a product's naturalness just by looking at it. In the next section, however, we will describe how perceptions of naturalness involve different rationales and see that the line of distinction is often far from as simple as that illustrated in the exchange above.

At this point, it important to ask how does the concept of naturalness relate to parents' understanding of good parenting? Charlotte, a mother of two girls, explained that she did use probiotic as a means of treatment for her daughter, but she refused to use it preventively. She referred to the unique composition of small children and clearly saw it as her job, as a parent, to protect her daughters from unnecessary products:

Charlotte: We did this (used probiotics supplements) only because she had stomach ache. Otherwise, I would never give my child Lactic acid bacteria, if I didn't think it was absolutely necessary.

I: No, why not?

Charlotte: Because I think we enter this world as small, perfect creatures and [that] we have the composition we have, and [that] unless something is not right, we should be able to function just fine.

Charlotte explains that she considers children perfect pieces of nature: "we enter this world as small, perfect creatures". This is the key sentence if we are to understand why parents apply the concept of naturalness in their consumption practices. As parents consider their children as perfect pieces of nature in themselves, too much interference from useless or even harmful products may cause an imbalance in them (Author *et al.*, 2018).

### ***Multiple perceptions of the natural***

Although the parents agreed that naturalness was important when they were deciding on a product, we can identify different dimensions of the concept. We identified three dimensions of naturalness across the interviews. A parent or couple may, of course, draw on more than one of these dimensions, or on all three of them, when they explain their consumption practices.

### ***Familiarity***

The first dimension, familiarity-based naturalness, associates naturalness with a product to which one has an established relation. The line of thought is that if I, or someone I trust, used this product previously and did not experience any harm, the product is safe to use for my child. Mary, a mother of two small children, explained why she prefers to buy them products made from natural sources, such as clothes made of wool, shoes of leather, toys of wood, sleeping bags made from lamb skin and so on. When asked why she prefers such products for her children, she at first found it difficult to explain, but then described her preference for natural products as a matter of tradition:

Mary: I guess it is because I'm a bit old school or something like that. That is how you have always done it. Children have always been sleeping on lamb skin, I guess. I use lamb skin for so many things, so of course the kids should have it too. They don't have sleeping bags, they have bags made of lamb skin. It is natural [laughing].

Mary refers to past generations, and to tradition, and to the fact that she uses lamb skin herself, in explaining her attitude. So, here naturalness is about familiarity. Familiarity with a product gives a feeling of safety.

Familiarity-based naturalness is particularly prominent when parents talk about the second-hand toys they inherited from past generations, or when they explain food practices by, for example, referring to the way they grew up with specific foods and cooking techniques, and expressing their desire to pass on these traditions to their own children.

## *Purity*

The second dimension, the purity dimension, is noticeably dominant in our data. Naturalness is here associated with the purity of a product. Non-naturalness is associated with anything that taints the purity of a product. This may include products where things are added, such as additives or chemicals or products which are somehow manipulated during the production process. Purity-based naturalness equates a non-natural product with an artificial product. It is sometimes not easy, however, to decide if a product is pure or not, as one cannot detect the purity of a product just from its bare appearance. Deciding on the purity of a product therefore involves strategies such as reading labels, investigating the latest research and looking at test results or guidelines. It involves tracking down the history of the product.

Unlike with the familiarity dimension, an established relation to a product here is not a safety guarantee in itself. Rather, inherited toys from former generations might be rejected because there is a risk that they will contain unknown, harmful elements. So, where the familiarity dimension finds safety in the personal relation to the product through, for example, traditions, the purity dimension connects safety with suitable product labels, test outcomes, guidelines and new research. Parents applying purity-based naturalness may have a practice of buying only products with labels that are trusted. They may reject products if they cannot gather enough information to decide on their purity:

Jette: So, Peter had some old toys that he had inherited. Some things his mum had saved, some small animals and stuff like that. And I don't like that the kids play with them because I think that they are filled with all kinds of different stuff. I don't think we agree about this. But anyway [...]

I: How do you disagree?

Jette: So, I guess Peter is a bit more relaxed about it, whereas I'm thinking: No way, there is probably all kinds of different stuff in those – chemicals that they have taken out [of toys produced today].

The purity dimension involves both a material and social component. The material component is – as described – a matter of the absence of artificial substances. The social component involves the absence of “bad intentions”. Bobby, a father with a son, explained it this way:

Interviewer: Why is something better because it is natural?

Bobby: Because this is how one is created – if there was a God, then this is how it was supposed to be, I guess. I can hardly answer that because it is so obvious to me. I can't see why anyone could think they could do it better than nature itself. And there is this detail that nature does not have to earn money. Those who produce, for example, Lactocare [a supplement for kids with probiotics] have to.

In these remarks, Bobby ascribes nature a sanctified position. Nature is perfect as it is, as this is how God created it. Nature is inherently good. Further, nature is to be trusted because it does not have to make a profit – something which companies do have to do. Nature is described as if it were a person with agency and personal characteristics. Thus, purity here is a form of innocence. Nature is innocent, whereas companies have all kinds of commercial interests.

### *A sub-dimension of purity: “how it was originally”*

The purity dimension includes a sub-dimension involving a comparative element. This means that parents do not only think about the purity of products and their constitutive elements but also measure the purity of the product *per se* in terms of whether the product complies with the nature of human beings. Rikke, a mother of two, explained that she has

never used lotion for her children's skin, as she considers that non-natural. When the interviewer asked her what she meant by "natural", she introduced an evolutionary perspective:

Interviewer: What do you mean by natural?

Rikke: Well, well [...] The natural thing is to do nothing. That is how it was originally. But today there are all these soap products, and you have to be careful because they can cause an imbalance in the natural fat balance in your skin.

Here, Rikke in effect introduces the primitive man and his behavior as a gold standard against which to measure the naturalness of products. The primitive man is the ideal, as he did nothing. He was not contaminated by artificial products. In the parental understanding, the newborn child shares some of the characteristics as the primitive man. Like the primitive man, newborn children are born in perfect balance with nature: pure and not yet contaminated by unnecessary products. Rikke applies an understanding of nature (here, the child) as something that was in perfect harmony until human beings (here, products that parents introduce) began to interfere and manipulate it. Thus, within this sub-dimension non-naturalness is the disruption or disturbance of (what is perceived to be) the natural development of babies.

The notion of "how it was originally" was also invoked when mothers explained why they breastfed their children, or why they were disappointed that they had to go through a C-section and miss out on a "natural" birth. It also appeared when a few of the parents explained why they had limited their children's consumption of milk. Thus, Aske, a father of two daughters, described how he and (mainly) his partner had restricted their children's consumption of milk in response to its perceived non-naturalness and the conflicting messages they had received about milk:

Aske: We don't serve the children milk. Not to the big one either. She doesn't get milk, except once in a while when there is milk added to a product. Instead she will have water, right. And she loves it. And we're like, some recommend something, and some recommend something else[...]

Interviewer: But why have you decided not to give her milk then?

Aske: It's the wife that has decided it. Something about the fact that cow milk is not natural for humans to drink. But we're not fanatical about it and once in a while she does get a glass of milk.

So, national guidelines on milk consumption may be abandoned in favor of what parents consider natural. Further, it is worth noting that Aske refers to the children's mother when explaining why they decided to abandon milk. The participating fathers similar to Aske would often refer to the mothers when explaining everyday consumption routines. Thus, although the fathers in these interviews are highly involved caregivers, they (still) seem to hold a secondary position when it comes to child-related consumption routines. The fathers were, however, supportive of the mothers' decisions.

The purity dimension was drawn on most often by parents when they discussed issues of naturalness. It was dominant when the parents explained specific food consumption strategies, such as avoiding processed food, additives in food and products with added sugar, or said why they preferred to buy organic products. But it also dominated outside the food context, for example, when the parents argued that they prefer non-food products made from natural materials, such as shoes of leather or toys made from wood.

## *Culture*

The third dimension introduces a cultural interpretation of naturalness. For example, some of the parents interviewed argued that they would never forbid their children from consuming products with added sugar, as such products are a huge part of our cultural



traditions, and therefore to deny children access to sugar is not natural. Rikke, who (as we saw above) also drew on the purity dimension, explained:

Rikke: And I certainly don't have a "zero sugar" policy because I think it is unnatural. I think it is to teach the kids something different from how the world looks like today. I think it would make it harder for them to control the sugar when they one fine day are confronted with it and have the opportunity to consume sugar.

The cultural dimension differs from the familiarity and purity because it ascribes cultural norms to naturalness. This dimension recognizes that humans do not by nature need to drink milk, eat junk food, use lotion or eat sugar, but acknowledges also that, in today's culture, denying children these things would not be natural and would be more harmful than allowing them. Here, harm is not only a physical matter; it involves a social dimension too. The idea is that if one abandons sugar, there is a risk that the child might be socially different and excluded. In this dimension, naturalness refers to what is ordinary, usual or normal. Where the familiarity dimension relates naturalness to a personal relation to a product, the cultural dimension connects it with social norms and values. Where the purity-based naturalness finds safety in the story of the product, and what has been done to it, cultural naturalness is merely a question of normality. Consider a pear that is round instead of pear-shaped. From a cultural perspective on naturalness, this would be a rather unusual pear, and thus non-natural – a pear that we would avoid purchasing for our children. If we were looking at the pear's purity, however, we would investigate the way it was grown, and if we found that that involved no pesticides and GM technologies, we might well consider it natural regardless of its shape. We may even conclude that the pear is more natural than a regular pear-shaped pear. The purity dimension values harmony with nature; the cultural dimension values compliance with social and cultural norms. This is not to overlook that it can be less than clear in some cases what harmony with nature actually means, and this is a question which calls for further research.

### *The moral value of naturalness*

Naturalness is more than a guiding principle. It is a social norm against which parents measure their behavior. This means that when parents fail to act on the principle of naturalness, they may experience feelings such as guilt or worry, and that when they consume natural goods, they may experience increased feelings of pleasure, of enjoyment in good parenting. This is especially evident when parents talk about the food they prepare, or buy, for their children. Here, buying what are perceived as natural foods, and preparing dishes from raw ingredients, engenders feelings of good parenting.

The norm of naturalness is also evident when mothers talk about giving birth. Here, too, mothers strive to have what they describe as a natural birth. This includes the avoidance of medication such as epidurals and pain relievers. C-sections – interventions that are described as the very opposite of natural birth – are felt to be a failure. The few women in our sample who had been given acute C-sections following birthing complications expressed strongly negative feelings about the procedure. Interestingly, these women did not mention the negative physical side effects of being surgically operated upon at all. Rather, their stories revealed emotional side effects such as disappointment about not living up to their own expectations as natural mothers. One mother explained how it took her close to a year to process her disappointment about not being able to give birth naturally. She explained that, with the intervention, she missed out on the opportunity to give birth as a "real primeval woman" (her words). Naturalness, therefore, is not only an important consideration in decisions relating to consumption; it is also a matter of what feels right and wrong in a moral sense. It affects how women look back on their birth experiences and are decisive in

determining whether they had what they would describe as a good, or a bad, experience. Most importantly, the naturalness ideal seems to influence the way these women think of themselves as women. Medical interventions such as C-sections lead them to question their female identity.

In this way, naturalness becomes a guiding principle of life itself. For example, it was important when the interviewees talked about decisive life choices, such as their choice of residence. Here, the parents referred to nature as an important factor in buying a house with a garden and moving out of the city. The argument was that a garden increases the chances of an active childhood, and that a childhood in close proximity to nature provides the child with the opportunity to follow the course of nature, and to see and study how things grow. In short, access to a garden increases feelings of good parenting, whereas raising a child in the city evokes worries about pollution and traffic, as well as a problematic lack of direct access to nature:

Tina: And then we live on Church Street. There's a lot of traffic. And noise from the traffic and things like that. And I'm thinking a bit about this because we know by now that this level of noise affects your health. (.) And then also the pollution from cars. When we're on holiday – in the countryside – then I'm thinking: Now these poor city kids will finally have some fresh air [laughing]. So, it is merely the air and the car pollution that I'm most concerned about. And the house that we will probably move to is only one mile away from here, so the air is not super clean there either. But it feels like it is, because there is this garden, right? So that was essential, that there was a garden, and that it was larger than a small stamp, so that they would be able to play properly and go outside and such like.

Here, Tina, a mother of two, explains that she worries about the effects of living in a street with heavy traffic. She explains that she and her husband are about to buy a house with a garden in the neighborhood. Interestingly, she is aware that the new house may have similar levels of pollution, but she stresses that the garden makes her feel differently about pollution. The garden, as a symbol of nature, eases Tina's worries, although she is fully aware that this may be just a matter of self-deception. Nature can also be decisive when, for example, parents are choosing day-care for children. Some of the parents talked about how they preferred a preschool in the forest rather than an ordinary preschool[1].

Mette: So, this thing about being able to go out in the forests all the time and play with whatever one finds instead of with conventional toys. This somehow provides you with a [...] natural robustness

Interviewer: A natural robustness? What does that imply?

Mette: Well, yes [...] that is to have nature as your preschool. And not a moon car or a sand box and that kind of stuff. But it is to be curious and create your own day in some way. Because in an ordinary preschool it is already given what you should play with, but this is not the case in the forest. Here you find a dead squirrel one day and a pine cone and some feathers on another. And I simply believe that this provides you with another kind of creativity.

Other parents might have been alarmed at the bacteria in a dead animal, but to Mette, the squirrel represents an important opportunity of playful education because meetings with nature train a child's imagination and creativity.

### **Discussion: to create a natural environment around children**

Young childhood comes with risks, and the parenting of a young child involves close monitoring, constant surveillance and ongoing reflection about the steps that might be required to secure the health and safety of the child (Lupton, 2011; Martens, 2014;

Nelson, 2008). Previous research (Lupton, 2011, 2013) has emphasized the importance of parents' belief in their own ability to shape and control children's health – and thereby also the opposite, to potentially harm their children. Such parental beliefs are embedded in consumption practices. Parents purchase products that they believe will reduce the risks their children encounter and improve their children's health (Nelson, 2008).

In this paper, we have advanced the argument that parents navigate risks by resorting to naturalness as a safe haven. We have also argued that, depending on the context, parents apply different perceptions of naturalness, involving different parental consumption strategies. The different dimensions of naturalness are also an important discussion within the field of bioethics. Here, for example, Siipi (2008) identifies a dimension that defines naturalness as a relation between entities, and another dimension in which naturalness relates to what is considered usual or ordinary. However, naturalness as a matter of purity and innocence is less evident in her findings. This may be because we have studied naturalness in a different field and in relation to a specific population. The various dimensions of naturalness and non-naturalness were not always applied in a coherent or consistent way by the parents in our study, and indeed our results suggest that parents' perceptions of naturalness may at times be inconsistent. What is categorized as natural in relation to one dimension is not necessarily categorized as natural in relation to another. Although in this paper we did not set out to “reveal” such inconsistencies, we did intend to shed light on the different rationales underlying naturalness. We did so by linking the parental attraction to naturalness to parental understandings of the child as a pure piece of nature that is at risk of being contaminated by harmful products.

In her analysis of infancy, pollution and parenting, Murcott (1991) observed fundamental mechanisms of contamination which resemble those we have noted. In Murcott's study, mothers strive to protect the baby's body from the dirt it produces (such as feces). But the mothers in Murcott's study also strive to protect the babies from the world around them. According to Douglas (1966), dirt deviates from the usual order of things and thereby represents a threat to the cultural order. In this way, Douglas argues that reactions to dirt are similar to reactions to all the other things which deviate from culturally acceptable patterns of society. Dirt symbolizes anomaly in a broad sense, and, as Douglas comments, “pollution is used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order” (Douglas, 1966, p. 4). Thus, the social order is upheld by a belief in the dangers of contagion and pollution.

Murcott (1991) explains that babies are human beings who confront the general (adult) order of society. As they are not yet aware of cultural norms, babies disrupt usual routines and norms. Yet, they remain innocent as a consequence of their physical and social immaturity. According to this logic, babies are, then, both polluting and at risk of being polluted, both literally and metaphorically speaking. To protect babies from both internal and external pollution, mothers create an extremely sterile environment (a cordon sanitaire) around their babies (Murcott, 1991, p. 17). This maintains the babies' purity and innocence.

We too have found that parents take precautionary steps in their management of the baby's body. But whereas the mothers in Murcott's study focused on maintaining a clean and sterile environment for their babies, the parents in our sample focused on creating an environment that is natural. Consider here once again the dead squirrel (which we analyzed in detail in the previous section). In Murcott's study, a dead squirrel would represent a potential source of pollution, something children need to be protected from because of the risk of harmful bacteria in cadavers. But in our study, we found that the dead squirrel more than anything becomes a symbol of nature; and because nature is interpreted as inherently good, the squirrel represents an opportunity of exploration and education rather than something to be avoided for sanitary reasons. The purification strategies of the parents in our study were therefore designed to create a natural environment around their children, not necessarily one that was clean or sterile. To the parents in our study, naturalness represents social order.

Further reflection on the purification strategy may also help us to explain why purity was the most dominant of the three dimensions of naturalness to emerge in our empirical material. If non-natural products represent a source of pollution, the consumption of natural products may help maintain the purity of the baby's body and uphold social order. In other words, because of the uniquely pure and innocent position of babies in our culture, the purity dimension is vital to parents because it maintains the precious uniqueness of the baby. From this, it follows that if we study naturalness in relation to teenagers, adults or the elderly, the purity dimension of naturalness might be less dominant – but for the time being, this is a hypothesis only. Further research would be needed to confirm it.

Babies are not alone in being characterized by parents as pure and innocent. Parents also describe nature in those terms. [Giddens \(1999, p. 3\)](#) claims that the rise of a risk society is linked to “the end of nature”. This societal transformation means that no parts of the world are untouched by humans. Humans control nature – or, at least, they attempt to do so. This affects our very perception of nature itself. In traditional societies, human beings worried about the dangers that nature posed. Today, we worry more about what harms we, as human beings, are doing to nature. This “end of nature” scenario evokes a sentimental perception of nature, e.g. nature as innocent contrasts with the notion of nature as dangerous and wild. Parental attraction to natural products is also, therefore, the upshot of changes in our understanding of nature itself.

## Conclusion

This study shows that the concept of naturalness plays an important role in consumption strategies applied by parents of young children. In the interviewees' descriptions, the infant body and nature itself share similarities. Nature itself is perceived as innocent, pure and inherently good. Results from our analyses show that the principle of naturalness represents a sort of purification strategy that parents apply to avoid or reduce perceived risks associated with consumption, what we describe as resorting to naturalness as safe haven. Natural products are perceived as safe. Non-natural products are not. Thus, naturalness is an efficient tool for managing complex consumption opportunities, as it eliminates many options while, at least in principle, shielding children from the harm that may be caused by non-natural products. Individual parents in our study drew on more than one dimension of naturalness when explaining their consumption practices, sometimes in a contradictory manner. This suggests that neither consumption nor naturalness is a consistent practice, and internal consistency in how the concept is applied appears to be less imperative than shielding and protecting children from potential harm. On a theoretical level, this implies that the taxonomies parents apply in relation to consumption are neither general nor personal but are linked to the context of consumption.

The parental attraction to naturalness also has some practical implications, e.g. the parental perception of naturalness may at times conflict with public authorities' guidelines on health, and the parental questioning of guidelines may in the long run have consequences for public health. Therefore, authorities need to acknowledge that parents navigate in everyday consumption by applying different rationalities than that of experts, for example, parents may experience consumption of already approved and authorized products as risky. Thus, authorities may consider demystifying perceptions of naturalness in some areas of regulation and evaluating products that may be perceived as risky. Finally, our analysis did not explicate any differences between fathers and mothers in relation to perceptions of naturalness. However, we did find that fathers often refer to the mothers when describing child-related consumption choices. This finding suggests that although symmetrical parenthood may be a cultural ideal in Scandinavia, it is not practiced within the field of child-related consumption. Future studies should focus on whether fathers' engagement in parental consumption practices may be changing.

## Note

1. Forest or outdoor preschools are usual in urban areas of Denmark. They are preschools located in close proximity to a forest, or some kind of rural or open landscape.

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