The Paradox of Consumption: Scarcity and Affluence in the Swedish Welfare State

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to increase the understanding of how Swedish low-income families get by in a society characterized by affluence but with restricted possibilities to take part of it. The findings imply that consumers with low and insecure income tend to develop different coping strategies to consumption in order to get by in their everyday life. The paper aims also to highlight the need for more interdisciplinary research on consumers who are marginalized, and emphasizes the benefits of integrating theories on consumption and welfare.

INTRODUCTION
Swedish society has during the last decades undergone significant changes. We are witnessing consumers who live in wealth, consuming luxurious products and services and buying expensive cars and lavish handbags. At the same time, we can also observe consumers who cannot afford to consume, but live a more frugal life. The opportunities to consume seem endless by just looking at the abundance of goods for sale. The fact is, however, that free choice does not always exist (e.g., Gabriel and Lang 1995). This is illustrated in the old Swedish proverb “When manna (i.e. semolina) falls from the sky, the poor has no spoon.” Some consumers are not able to take advantage of possibilities when they are offered to them; they lack the necessary resources to be able to take advantage of the offer. Caplowitz (1963) wrote during the 1960s that the poor pay more and shed light on the conditions that the poor had to accept as consumers in the United States. Poverty was common in the Swedish society about 100-150 years ago, but has since then become less prevalent as Sweden has developed into a welfare economy during the 20th century. What is relatively new, however, is that poverty has recently started to increase in Sweden at the same time as affluence is also increasing. This growing polarization between the rich and poor is a world-wide phenomenon, even though the gaps in Sweden are less than in most parts of the world. The most significant change concerning the distribution of income in Sweden during the recent years is, however, not between rich and poor, but the widening gap between the average income level and the poor (SCB 2003). It is a situation where some consumers live in a society characterized by consumption and affluence without being able to take part of it. They are not able to consume the goods and services which a majority of the population see as something naturally to afford.

Considering this development, the lack of consumer research focusing on consumers living with limited resources, is somewhat surprising with the exception of for example, work on homeless (e.g., Hill 1990; Hill & Stamey 1991). Little is known about how poor consumers cope in a society where consumption seems to play a larger role in people’s life. The aim of this paper is to increase the understanding of how Swedish low-income families get by in their every-day life. The intention is also to highlight the need for more interdisciplinary research on consumers who are marginalized, emphasizing the benefits of integrating theories on consumption and welfare.

THE CATWALK OF CONSUMPTION
The possibilities to consume have changed dramatically during the last decades. An abundance of goods, Internet, new forms of credit and leasing, more intense and different forms of marketing are just a few examples of different aspects that have changed the landscape of consumption. The Western society can be seen as a consumer culture, a spinning wheel that spins faster and faster, irrespective of you are well-off or poor. Everyone is participating in the catwalk of consumption, exposed and judged based on consumption. It is through our consumption that we show our identity, who we are or who we would like to be. To not be able to afford involves social and psychological risk taking, to be perceived as deviant or poor, a stigmatisation that most people wants to avoid. Whether the basic meaning of consumption has changed from a material or functional meaning to a more symbolic one is subject for discussion (Aldridge 2003; Edwards 2000). Aldridge (2003) questions this and means that a lot of consumer activities are still often based on functionality, for example, a car is bought as a means of transport and not merely as an expression of identity. He emphasizes that a lot of consumer activities are built on routine and rationality rather than the wish to express oneself through symbols and signs to others.

Whether or to what extent consumption can be understood as a dimension of exclusion or inclusion and in which ways consumption creates processes of marginalization in society deserves more attention in research. Research on welfare has not highlighted consumption as an important issue in studies on poverty or social exclusion. Neither has research on consumption in consumer behaviour, sociology, anthropology nor cultural studies sufficiently discussed the meaning of scarce financial resources in relation to consumption or the consumer society. Lodziak (2002) states that cultural studies if anything, has misinterpreted the new consumer society when it comes to inequality. While cultural studies often interprets the new consumption society as a way towards equality in that everyone can choose the style and identity they want, Lodziak emphasizes that this is not the case, but that inequalities instead creates new forms of stratification and marginalization. It needs to be recognized that consumers live under different conditions. While research on poverty has mainly focused on poor consumers in poor countries, we know very little about what it means to live in an affluent consumer society having less financial resources than the majority of the consumers. There is a need for more research on this.

THEORIES ON WELFARE AND CONSUMPTION
We believe that it would be beneficial to integrate theories on welfare with theories on consumption, something that is easier said than done. As a starting point, we would like to identify three theoretical fields dealing with poverty, welfare and consumption.

The first field deals with how low-income consumers in a structural meaning are discriminated against in different ways (e.g., Allwitt and Donley 1996; Anderesen 1975; Caplovitz 1963; Hill 2002; Kempson 1996; Kempson et al. 2000). Maybe it is difficult to call this a theoretical field, it is more like a research area that focuses on market relations and has its disciplinary home in economics, marketing and sociology. The theories imply that consumers with scarce financial resources meet specific hindrances and barriers that seem to depend on the “laws of the market”. Examples of hindrances and barriers are aspects like access and price. To live in a poor area often means fewer opportunities to buy cheap and
poorer conditions when it comes to credits etc. This implies that poor consumers are being ignored; they are not seen as interesting “segments” of customers. This means that poor consumers have to play by the same rules as groups having more established financial situations, for example, a buffer and advantageous credit conditions. The poor consumers are not able to take advantage of all the consumption-related offers that other groups frequently use, for example, special offers or bonus for purchasing large quantities. Also, actors on the market of goods and services take advantage of the poor consumers, for example by offering installment plans or credits with high costs.

The second theoretical field, theories dealing with welfare, involves concepts such as exclusion, inclusion and marginalization (e.g., Bowring 2000; Gough, Eisenschitz and McCulloch 2006; Kronauer 1998; Lister 2004). They usually have the question of inequality as a main issue. In general, the theories on welfare try to explain how the welfare of different groups is changing in response to changes on, for example, the labour market. Researchers dealing with welfare theories also focus on the relation between institutions/security systems of welfare and vulnerable groups (e.g., Pierson 2001). A main issue here is vulnerable groups and their relation to the established society.

The third theoretical field has been developed in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, cultural theory, and marketing (e.g., Bauman 1998; Douglas & Isherwood 1996; Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Slater 1997). These theories discuss consumption from several perspectives but we have in this paper mainly concentrated on two issues. One issue deals with the increased significance of consumption in society. Consumption is from this point of view seen as something that is one of the most important activities that individuals use in order to display how they want to be understood by people in their surroundings. Bauman (1998), for example, consider consumption as something more significant than work, as a socioeconomic criterion. A related second issue is the symbolic meaning of consumption. For example, the issue is not merely whether a teenager should have a mobile phone or pair of sneakers, but which mobile phone brand or sneakers brand he/she should have. To view goods and services as something symbolic is of course nothing new, already Veblen (2000/1925) and Simmel (1990) discussed consumption in these terms. A new aspect discussed by the post-modern theories (e.g., Baudrillard 1998; Featherstone 1991) is that the functional or material meaning of consumption has lost its importance. By this they mean that consumption, in the western world, no more is questions of needs and function, all that matters are symbols and wants. Some researchers (e.g., Lodziak 2002; Löfgren 1996; Miller 1998) have criticized this perspective in that they mean that the postmodern view on consumption the everyday- and routine consumption. Post-modern consumer theory also suggests that consumption gives everybody the ability to choose their identity and be, or at least appear, as anybody they want to be. It might be interpreted as if consumption can take us away from the class society or inequality, a view we would like to warn against. Consumption opportunities are not offered to everyone, but limited to people having the resources. A critique of post-modern theories is that they do not treat aspects like inequality or the significance of economic resources as an important issue in the consumption society. On the contrary, they tend to consider consumption and the consumer driven society as a solution to the problems of inequality (e.g., Lodziak 2002). Even though consumption offers opportunities to consume, it needs to be recognized, that these opportunities are limited based on the resources available.

In summary, neither postmodern theories nor other theories on consumption have paid enough attention to groups that tend to be marginalized in society, groups which do not have the financial resources to be part of the consumer society to the same degree as others. An understanding of the consumer society of today requires us to deal with processes such as marginalization and exclusion. We argue that without these perspectives the picture of society tends to be limited and covers only some parts of it.

**THE WELFARE DEVELOPMENT IN SWEDEN**

In Sweden, a welfare crisis in the 1990s originating from decreased output in the manufacturing industry in combination with high costs to maintain the welfare state institutions, resulted in high unemployment rates and cuts in the social services. This problematic period was a new experience to the Swedish government, since the economic growth and the political reforms (for example, enlarging the state financed social security system in different ways) in the preceding years looked like a never-ending story. In the middle of the 1990s, the financial situation started to recover and the unemployment levels decreased. The following years showed a growing economy and positive development in the labour market. However, in the end of the 20th century it seemed as some group had fallen behind and had not been able to take part in the economic progress made. These groups consisted mainly of immigrants, youths and single parent families. They had problems in getting established on the labour market, facing more temporary and insecure forms of employment, rather often in combination with social assistance (SOU 2001). It was also noticeable that the word poverty was now more frequently used in the political, media as well as science debates (e.g., Halleröd 1991). The meaning of poverty is relative: it means that the income level has to be compared to the majority of the citizens, and that this level is so low that you can not live a life that can be characterized by others as normal. Sweden is a country which during the 20th century developed equality in income distribution. The development of the welfare state in Sweden has almost reached the level that it is, in general, considered strange if you can not buy things that are taken for granted by a majority. This is comparable to Townsend’s (1979:31) definition of poverty:

“…individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources necessary to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they, are in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.”

Other words than poverty, such as social exclusion and marginalization, have also been used more frequently in Sweden since the end of the 20th century. These words have previously been used in Europe and imply a new form of inequality in that some groups not only have much lower income than the majority, but they tend also to be excluded regarding possibilities in the labour market, housing market, education, and health. This concerns also democratic and political issues in that these groups vote and engage themselves politically in a much lesser degree than other groups (e.g., Bowring 2000; Gough, Eisenschitz & McCulloch 2006; Kronauer 1998; Lister 2004).

**DESIGN AND METHOD OF THE STUDY**

In total, 26 Swedish families with children were interviewed. In addition a focus group interview was conducted with four families. The study is based on a non-random judgmental sample.
All the families had in common that they have a scarce financial situation. About half of the families were single mothers with a limited establishment on the labour market (for example unemployment, part time or casual employment). The other half was immigrant families who arrived to Sweden in the end of 1980s or in the beginning of the 1990s. This means that they arrived just before the increased unemployment and have had problems integrating into the Swedish society, both regarding establishment on the labour-, housing- and education market. Also, their income levels were lower than appropriate considering their families previous education and work experience. 20 of the families were chosen from the fact that they during the last ten years had received accommodation allowance. Six were chosen because they had asked for economic help from a church based organization. Finally the four families who participated in the focus group were chosen from an organization for single parents.

It was problematic to get access to the interviewed families. To talk about consumption in relation to money is already a moral sensitive issue in Sweden and it is getting far more sensitive when it comes to a scarce financial situation. The fact that a family, by being a part of the study, is categorized as “poor” can also be a reason to say no. Also, maybe they do not see themselves as poor. Another reason is that most of the households where recipients of means tested allowances. This is a sensitive issue and could be a reason to say no. Some could have considered it as a risk to talk to someone, even a researcher, about their financial situation, and give information that could possibly reach local or federal authorities.

The first author conducted the interviews in the homes of the interviewed families. The parents of the families were interviewed, in most cases the mother and in some families both parents. The interviews took between one to two hours and were later transcribed word by word. The interviewed families were in the beginning of the interview asked to give a picture of their income situation during the last ten years to give the interviewer an idea of their nearest income history. The interview guide was a combination of quantitative questions taken from a national survey about living conditions and qualitative questions about consumption, scarcity, household budget and the situation for the children. The quantitative part included questions about certain goods, services and budgetary strategies and gave a good background picture of the households’ regarding resources and consumption. Most of the families gave quite rich descriptions of how they, for example, bought their TV or how they tried to get information about discounts also for the quantitative questions. They could answer with a short yes or no but chose often to give a more elaborated answer. In the qualitative part, the parents gave a deeper and more complex picture of problems linked to consumption and scarce resources. The parents where asked to give examples and illustrate with episodes. Thereafter followed several questions in order to get a deeper understanding of what these examples and episodes meant to the parents and how they interpreted them. In the analysis process, we searched for patterns in the interview material. First, we tried to identify hindrances and barriers regarding consumption and scarcity. Second, we looked for patterns regarding ways to cope with different situations regarding consumption, parenthood and scarcity.

FINDINGS

The result shows structural factors that create specific conditions for low-income consumers as well as different mechanisms restricting these families consumption. Also, prevailing societal norms and codes regarding how households in general and in particular households with scarce financial resources should consume. Furthermore, the results indicate that the families viewed use certain strategies for managing their consumption, in other words how they cope with scarce financial resources in comparison to other groups of households in a consumer society. However, strategy is a complex and problematic concept. In a study on Russian households, Ekström et al. (2003) found that different coping devices were used to deal with changes in food provision and consumption related to economic reforms. A prevalent coping device among those households was to make use of and develop immaterial resources such as knowledge skills and the use of technology. Other coping devices were increased in self-production of, for example, potatoes and vegetables, trying to keep food costs down by changing diet or bartering, and trying to increase income by having additional employment or producing food or other items for selling. Coping is, however, different from strategy. The latter implies imply a more goal-oriented behavior (Pennartz and Niehof, 1999). We choose the concept coping strategy even if we think it is problematic. Strategy overemphasizes dimensions as planning and coping focuses too much on a passive behavior. Even the poor can be a very active consumer. The processes that we try to understand are too complex to be included in one concept and it seems like we, as so many others, were captured in the field between agency and structure.

Structural factors

There are certain structural factors that create specific conditions for low-income consumers. The results indicate that the interviewed household’s position on the labor, housing and education markets, as well as their possibility to have access to the welfare security system, is crucial for their possibilities as consumers. A marginalized or excluded position in these fields tends to hinder and raise barriers for consumption. For example, unemployment can be seen as a marginalized position in the labor market that also hinders consumption. It is therefore of importance to study the mechanisms in the field of consumption as interrelated to those which create processes of inclusion or exclusion in other fields. The study shows for example how unemployment or overdebtness (which is rather usual among low-income households) exclude some families from signing contracts or credit arrangements.

Mechanisms restricting consumption

The field of consumption has also its own mechanisms that create various possibilities for different groups. The study shows that households with scarce financial resources mainly face three mechanisms that in different ways restrict their possibilities as consumers. First of all, there are mechanisms excluding households with scarce financial resources from different types of consumption. These mechanisms rule the possibilities of admission. If you do not have certain qualifications, for example, if you are unemployed, you are not allowed access to different types of contracts and credit arrangements. Second, there are mechanisms making consumption more difficult for households with scarce financial resources. These mechanisms govern access to certain kinds of consumption. The possibility of buying goods or services at lower prices can be more difficult if, for example, households do not have access to a car or the Internet. The third mechanism has to do with price. Households with scarce financial resources often have no buffer that they can use in their consumption to save money. Therefore, their consumption is often more expensive than that of other households in that they cannot take advantage of quantity discounts, sales, good quality (for example clothes, shoes and goods of better durability), and are often forced to make expensive credit arrangements when buying durable goods.
Dominating norms

Another issue related to norms and codes in the field of consumption is the dominating societal perceptions of how households in general, and those with scarce financial resources in particular, should consume. This has to do with how to be rational and economical (e.g., Alex 2003; Horowitz 1985; Löfgren 1996). It has also to do with being an active consumer of goods and services in order to be like everybody else and not deviate (e.g., Dellgren & Karlsson 2001). An informant expressed:

“They (the furniture) have been given to me or I have bought them second hand. The sofa I have, it is very torn, yes, it looks like hell. You do not really dare to invite people spontaneously. I feel embarrassed if I should invite my neighbours over for a cup of coffee. The society has become much more… you are judged or greeted based on income. If you have an income which is below, yes, if you are poor, then you have to fight much more to show who you really are if you are poor. And it is therefore you do not want to invite anybody when you do not have it nice-looking. If you see what I mean, you do not want to show… even though I am a good person after all.”

Another example is the prevailing norms made visible regarding appearance in different situations. A single mother expressed:

“And then when entering a bank, you may not be as well dressed, you may not have the nice-looking clothes. You have an old pair of jeans which you have had for a couple of years, still without holes and clean and everything, but still. And then you may be judged by that ‘nice’ person. Just that part can probably stop a lot of people.”

The households in this study talked about shame and the internal and external expectations that often lead to that they as parents experience a feeling of being trapped. On one hand, they are supposed to be economical, rational and not buy anything that could be understood as unnecessary. On the other hand, they are supposed to have a consumer pattern so that their children can have the same goods as their peers and take part in activities arranged by schools or pre-schools or in leisure time. These external expectations can be perceived as paradoxical.

Coping strategies to consumption

The families interviewed used different coping strategies to handle the needs of basic necessities and at the same time attempting to keep up with social necessities, being able to consume like everybody else. The strategies should not be seen as a description of how the families managed their consumption, instead they should be considered ideal types (Weber 1977) in order to categorize a complex picture of different actions.

The first coping strategy, compensation, consists of using consumption as a compensation for a situation characterized by scarcity and privation. The parents talked about their children as innocent victims of the bad financial situation and that the children should be sheltered as much as possible from the financial difficulties.

“Maybe you buy them the little extra that you actually can’t afford, because you feel that it is not their fault that the situation is like it is. Sometimes I can feel that I buy things to the children that are too expensive in relation to my income because I know that they can never get as much as their friends. And also because you see yourself as insufficient, you want to compensate for it.”

The parents bought their children branded clothes, toys, TV- and computer games or let their children attend the cinema or McDonalds etc. These are things that do not fit into their budget, and the parents had to cut down on something else for themselves that they see as a basic necessity, for example, the dentist or home insurance. Another way was to buy goods on instalment rather than paying for it all at once. In general, the parents did not see the goods or activities they compensated their children with, as luxuries. Instead, it was regarded more as a question of the children having the opportunities to have or do the same things as other children.

If compensation is a coping strategy directed towards the children in the family, the second one, keeping up the facade, is concerned with covering up a scarce financial situation from those close to the family such as peers, staff in school etc. Besides buying goods and activities, as mentioned above, this strategy can also include arrangements in schools or pre-schools etc. that parents have to pay for, such as school-trips. The parents wanted their children to take part in these activities and the children were important for representing the family to the “outside” world. A mother said:

“Sure, I feel the pressure to maintain a certain standard, mostly because I have children. That is very obvious regarding a computer and a mobile phone and these things. I really feel the pressure. I bought a mobile phone, I rarely use it. It is expensive to use, but such things are so incredible important, to be like everybody else, I really feel that, “

The parents did not seem to run the same risk to be pointed out as deviant or poor. They described the children and the teenagers as being more exposed to social judgement in relation to consumption. However, the parents also expressed concerns for being judged by other people in that scarce financial resources sometimes is associated with bad parenthood.

The third coping strategy, privation, involves being without goods and activities that everybody else seems to have or do. Privation entails being extremely economical, to have a carefully calculated shopping list which is often the same week after week. Privation also involves buying second-hand clothes, mending clothes and using hand-me-downs. This disposition might indicate that a family can save a small sum of money to cover unforeseen expenses. Privation also means that the family expose themselves to the risk of being seen as poor and deviant. A single mother expressed:

“… because I never buy anything. If I had been such a person who had lived a normal life like most people do, I think it would have been very difficult. But I do not think like that, I always think economically. I get by because I save and scrape, otherwise I had not managed, I don’t think. Because I have three children and I am single. A lot of things suffers…”

Several parents talked about how they tried to keep their children outside the discussions about money, to protect their children from the scarce situation so they do not need to worry. However, this protecting strategy often seemed to be in vain because the children and teenagers seemed to be aware of the situation. Instead of just asking for things for themselves they asked if the parent(s) could afford, for example, renting a movie on a Friday evening.

The fourth coping strategy, acute solutions, is about not paying or buying anything before it is absolutely necessary. This last minute strategy is a way to control money, to have it in the purse or in the bank as long as possible, or not paying for something
without a specific reason. It often tends to be more expensive since it does not allow planning of purchases including possibilities to take advantage of opportunities. This should be seen in the light of that these families seldom have an economical buffer and that they do not only have low but also an insecure income. If they receive social assistance, they can not be sure of how much money they will get the next time. Several families said that they have to choose between which bills to pay, since they can not afford them all. To pay bills were moments of worries: should there be enough money or how much money will there be left when the bills are paid. A mother talked about the current bills:

“No, it is very difficult. It is so bad that I put the envelope with the bills on the desk a few days before they have to be paid. Then I go around this table two or three days before I can manage to sit down and start with it. I get pain in my stomach when I shall add the sums of the bills. I have to look at them a few days before I have the guts to deal with them, it is too bad.”

The fifth coping strategy, avoidance, is linked to the second one that involved trying to cover up the financial scarcity by buying goods that the parents see as social necessities. However, it means covering up in another way: to avoid situations where either the children or the parents (or both) can appear as poor or deviant. This can mean saying no to invitations such as birthday parties when there is no money to buy a present or avoiding to invite people over. One single mother expressed:

“The social life suffers when there is a lack of money. I can not invite people over coffee or dinner, for example. I do not want to reveal my situation to other people. You feel a sort of shame.”

An example was to report the child as sick when there was a school trip that the parents could not afford to pay for. A mother expressed the difficulties involved when going on a school trip:

“He is 13 years old. Now he probably starts to become aware of… yes there are more pupils in the class who have single mothers, so they probably talk… but of course he sometimes becomes sad when he can not get things like the others, cool shoes or go to camps or such things like the others do. There will also be less (money) for him to bring than the others if they are going on a school trip.”

These five coping strategies can be something that families in general use from time to time or in a temporary financial downswing. However, in regard to the families in this study, it is more of a permanent situation. The financial scarcity has been going on for a long time, for most of the families at least eight to ten years. These coping strategies are not exceptions for the interviewed families: on the contrary it is something that characterizes their everyday life.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

It is puzzling that some consumers, in spite of a well-developed welfare state, can not afford necessities required in the society. The context of this paper is Sweden, which is a society characterized as a society with lesser gaps regarding the income levels between different groups than most parts of the world. But the gap is widening and this development has an impact on the conditions for consumption for the poorer groups. This study has pointed to three important issues regarding marginalized consumers.

First of all, the prevailing idea of the market of goods and services as a free market, offering equal opportunities, regardless of socioeconomic position, is problematic. The study has shown an interrelationship between the field of consumption and other significant fields such as labour, housing, education markets and the welfare systems. There are credit arrangements that give low-income groups access to more expensive and durable goods, but on the whole there seems to be a lot of barriers. Lack of access and too high price make the consumption more difficult for households with scarce financial resources. The ideal consumer is the one who either has a high income or lives in a household with two salaries. He/she has a car, own their home, and have a buffer to meet unforeseen expenses, as well as purchase bargains when the opportunity occurs. The families in this study are not ideal consumers, but they have to act in a market of goods and services that seems to favour the ideal consumer. The processes of marginalization that function in the fields of labour market and welfare systems are linked to the processes in the field of consumption.

Secondly, there is the gap between material and social necessities. If we assume that households with a median income set the standard for what is seen as social necessities, it ought to be more problematic for low-income households to manage the gap in times when inequality in incomes increases. In this study, we have found that the households struggle to consume the material necessities and to some point keep up with the social ones. The income gap in Sweden between the median and the low-income families with children has increased between 1993 and 2001 (SCB 2003). The question is if the gap between material and social necessities has also increased. If the gap continues to increase in the future, it will be more difficult for some households to manage the gap. For example, it can lead to an increase in debts if low-income households have to use more and more credit-arrangements to keep up with the standard for social necessities. Another possibility is that the households cut down on what is seen as material necessities.

The third issue concerns the children, but also the parents. In this study the children have been discussed as victims but also as being given high priority by their parents. Of course, it can be tough to grow up in a family with scarce financial resources, but parents do at the same time shelter their children against scarcity. In the study, some parents even talked about their children almost as if they were princes and princesses. Another possible interpretation is that the parents are the real victims, not allowing themselves to consume, but making sacrifices in their basic consumption for their children’s symbolic consumption.

Future research need to take a closer look at what is really going on inside marginalized families when it comes to consumption and in what ways a scarce financial situation influences the interaction between the family members regarding consumption. There is also a need to develop a broader theoretical framework when it comes to understanding different group’s position in and relation to the consumer society. It is important to highlight questions about inequality and different access to goods and services. We therefore stress the need for more interdisciplinary research on consumption and welfare. This highlights the importance of identifying and studying the forms of exclusion and inclusion which the consumer society creates. If Western societies are considered as societies driven by consumption, then there is a need to understand processes that create differentiation and stratification. There exists a considerable bulk of knowledge regarding exclusion and inclusion in relation to the labour market and the welfare state: it is now time to direct the searchlight towards the consumer society. We need to develop new theoretical tools and concepts to get a deeper
understanding of how those mechanisms works in the consumer society.

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