Consumption, Social Status and Distinction Among Working Class Families

Rodrigo Castilhos, FISUL, Brazil
Carlos Rossi, UFRGS, Brazil

The present ethnography seeks to understand the role of consumption in the construction and maintenance of the cultural identity of urban lower classes. It was observed the existence of three different sub-classes whose structural differences are mainly generated by different combinations in the scope Economic, Cultural and Social Capital. Such differentiation becomes apparent in the possession of consumer goods and in distinctive social practices. Results show that consumption is a key element in the formation of social identity in the urban poorer class, being a powerful inter-classes distinctive mechanism, in spite of its incapacity of removing well-established social barriers.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14131/la/v2_pdf/LA-02

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Consumption, Social Status and Distinction among Working Class Families
Rodrigo Castilhos, FISUL, Brazil
Carlos Rossi, UFRGS, Brazil

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The present paper seeks to understand and interpret the role of consumption in the construction and maintenance of the cultural identity of urban lower classes. Assuming that consumption patterns are the result of socio-cultural formative conditions, as well as the interaction imposed on individuals by their class position (Henry, 2002; Williams, 2002), which can operate as a consumption sub-culture where individuals share similar tastes which organise their actions (Holt, 1997), we tried to have a better understanding on how individuals belonging to the lower strata of the Brazilian social hierarchy relate in their community and to the world through the acquisition and use of goods and services.

The option for ethnography as a methodological approach reflects the intention to verify the function of consumption in the logic of everyday relationships in a poor neighbourhood. This method was carried out not only as a way of collecting data, but also as means to clarify the ways in which a culture simultaneously constructs and is constructed by people’s behaviour and experiences (Arnould; Wallendorf, 1994). On the whole, six families were studied in five months and a half of fieldwork in a poor neighbourhood of a State capital in Brazil, which generated a huge amount of material that was analysed and interpreted.

Despite the external representation and the self-image of homogeneity among low income people in Brazilian urban areas, it was observed the existence of nuances among the members of the community studied, which led to a distinction of three different sub-classes: the ‘poor’, the ‘really poor’ and the ‘elite of the hill’. Three major elements structure the distinction among the hill dwellers: Firstly, the financial resources of individuals determine their possibilities of engaging in a process to improve living conditions, which includes an increase in the acquisition of consumer goods. Secondly, ‘knowing how to spend money’ seems to be central to the individuals surveyed once it means to be able to invest on the most valued goods, the ones that lend their owners some social distinction; The last important element in this social structure is the network of relationships in the community. In conclusion, theses three structural elements of distinction in the hill seem to be very close to Economic, Cultural and Social Capital (Bourdieu, 1979; 1987)

In spite of the structural determining factors, it is the possession of goods and the consumption practices that effectively distinguished the poor from each other. Being able to ‘buy things’ can differentiate the ‘poor’ from the ‘really poor’. Some goods, such as a car, a house and its finishes, the 29 inches TV set, and the electronics, specially the DVD player and the Personal Computer, are responsible for making the subjects in this study see themselves as different from others and also make the others see them as so. Clothes can also be used to differentiate individuals in the hill, especially among the youth. Finally, food is seen as a powerful element to reaffirm the identity of ‘poor’. Excess of food, at the same time that need and hunger are negated and the distinction from the very poor is established, also reaffirms the distinction from the ‘rich’, who eat little either to keep aesthetic principles or due to ‘arrogance’.

Due to close relationships among the hill dwellers, individuals are permanently in contact with each other, making it common practice to judge both their possessions and acts. In this context being polite, for example, is a kind of attitude that sets these individuals apart from those who are less satisfied with their social conditions and their dwellings. However, even the most polite individuals adopt practices that could be considered ‘excessive’, which seem to aim at reinforcing social identity, instead of being an instrument of distinction, since people give the impression of being aware of the association between poverty and excess. Last, contacts outside the community or with the ‘elite of the hill’ tend to be highly valued, in a set where having friends or acquaintances outside and between the most affluent hill dwellers means to have contact with coders of behaviour and influences that broaden the horizon, and help to keep distinctions inside the community.

The results show that the consumption of goods is a key element in the formation and the preservation of social identity in the urban poorer class. On the whole, the possession and consumption of consumer goods does not lead to social mobility, which the working classes know that is extremely difficult and improbable, but aim at improving their live conditions compared to their own standards. The distinctive logic applies mainly to others belonging to the same social class, where the neighbours, instead of the ‘rich’, are the mirror which establishes parameters for some sort of material advancement that can be achievable and surpassed, being, for this very reason, a reality easier to endure. In addition, if consumption is incapable of removing cultural and social barriers between the working and the upper and middle classes, the results of this study show that it can even so be considered as a powerful intra-classes distinctive mechanism.

References
________, (2006), Consumo, hierarquia e mediação: um estudo antropológico no universo das empregadas domésticas. Anais do 30º EnAPAD.