Social Strain As an Antecedent of Innovativeness Among Subsistence Consumers

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This research seeks a more profound understanding of innovative behaviors among subsistence consumers as they seek transformative consumption experiences – transformative in terms of achieving solutions to survival and family well-being problems at the most basic level. Based on observation and interviews with subsistence consumers in several countries, we seek to better understand the strategies and behaviors of innovative subsistence consumers. Having found that not all innovativeness yields positive results, and that transformative consumption experiences can be detrimental instead of beneficial, we seek to identify antecedents to the innovation process that result in both positive and negative outcomes. At the individual-level the data show us that status frustration is an important motivator for the creative recombination of concepts and materials available to poor consumers through experimentation—a process that can often yield highly innovative problem solutions. The data also suggests that sociological forces, such as social inequality, can impinge on innovativeness and produce undesirable behaviors. Such is the case when subsistence consumers’ yearnings for socially validated life goals (i.e., financial success, greater levels of education) feel that they do not have the same opportunities or means to achieve such goals as other members of society. This gap between individual’s status expectations and actual achievement results in negative affect which leads his or her to engage in innovative behavior that is damaging to self and others. Multiple examples of the individual- and social-level mechanisms revealed by the data will be discussed.

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Building an Understanding of What Makes Consumer Behavior Transformative

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The purpose of this session is to create a discussion of what makes consumer behavior transformative (Mick 2006), and through presentations and discussion, to show how participatory approaches, as well as top down approaches adopted in social marketing, can be effective in accruing positive change to individual consumers and to society. More specifically, this session explores transformative consumption experiences that consumers create by appropriating marketplace resources for their own purposes. While considerable excitement has been generated by the emergence of more participatory models of market relationships, little attention has been directed to the market transformative potential of participatory consumer behavior, although evidence for these sorts of presumptive behaviors has been reported (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

Grassroots social innovation (Young Foundation 2006) in marketing systems provides an important complement to the more top down approaches espoused by some proponents of transformative consumer research. Social marketing seek to change behavior through marketing programs that help individuals understand and embrace prescribed positive behaviors. By contrast, participatory research approaches facilitate learning by actively engaging consumers in ways that help them define consumer-driven solutions to problems (Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008). Both social marketing and grassroots social innovation in market systems can and should coexist within the Transformative Consumer Research vision.

Increasingly consumers are insisting on building or reformulating markets that implement, amplify and promote principles and ideals marginalized, attenuated, or neglected by mainstream commercial interests (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007, 138). Consumers are interested in systemic market change; they have become active producers of their own consumption requirements. Unlike historic or classic countercultural approaches that emphasized utopian self-sufficiency or do-it-yourself models, today, consumers are becoming adept at developing marketing-informed solutions to create beneficial systems, often incorporating non-commoditized goods and/or local connectivity, as well. In other words, consumers are investing in qualitative improvements in need satisfying systems, in some cases incorporating the goal that net benefits to the society and the environment should be higher than the full systemic costs (Mont 2008, 253).

Sometimes attributed to the collective intelligence fostered by the Internet, and the democratization of digital media technologies, a paradigm shift in consumer behavior may be occurring (Jenkins 2006; Lévy 1997). Consistent with this idea of paradigm shift, the consumers described in the current session do not passively accept the dominant marketplace conditions with which they are presented, as Melea Press shows in a paper casting Consumer Supported Agriculture as a risk management strategy. Nor do consumers in marginalized socio-economic contexts passively accept resource constraints and external policy mandates that seek to define their consumption options as Baker, Hill, and Hunt demonstrate. Nor as Rosa and Geiger-Oneto illustrate, do resource constrained consumers passively accept resource deficits that lead some to characterize them as marginalized non-consumers. In effect, this session also builds directly on a past ACR session critical of TCR and CCT (Ozanne and Dobscha 2006). Our innovative approach will show how focusing on the market transforming capabilities of consumers may help us understand how to alter markets in the consumer interest, and concurrently destabilize inadequate theoretical binaries like mainstream vs. marginalized market actors. Moreover, the consumer strategies described here may represent a middle ground between the opt-out strategies promoted by some consumer downshifters and voluntary simplicity advocates, the legitimacy of which is contested, and the more acquiescent orientations to consumption of those in mass markets (Bekin, Carrigan and Szmiigir 2005; Mont 2008; Ottman 1995; Schorr 1998).

Professor Julie Ozanne, who has long championed both participatory approaches to policy-oriented consumer research and critical approaches to consumer research generally, will provide a synthesizing discussion of the papers and lead the audience in a discussion of the implications of these papers for developing the theory and practice of transformative consumer behavior research (Murray and Ozanne 1991; Ozanne and Dobscha 2006; Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008).

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Co-Creating Alternative Markets: Consumer Efficacy in Risk Abatement”

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Many consumers are disappointed with the current food marketing system, and are concerned by the risks they feel they take and the compromises they make with preferred values by engaging with a system they do not fully trust (Rampton and Stauber 2001). In an attempt to mitigate their feelings of risk, some consumers engage in marketplace activities that lie outside of the mainstream (Beck 1992). Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is highlighted here, as an example of how consumers are driving change in the marketplace by choosing to purchase products through non-mainstream channels.

Transformative consumer research (TCR) takes the approach that research should shed light on consumer issues, and help to improve consumers’ lives (Mick 2006). In this paper, the consumer is not painted as a marginalized figure that lacks efficacy; rather, the exemplary consumers in this paper are proactive and engaged members of a community who are able to make choices that affect their own wellbeing, as well as the marketplace itself. In the case of CSA, the idea of TCR is turned on its head, as we look to consumers to show us how they engage in alternative market activities, and advocate for their own needs.

CSAs are programs through which consumers can purchase produce (and sometimes meat and dairy products) directly from a farm. Farms that offer CSAs typically meet organic growing standards, and express concern for the environment, the local food system, and the local economy (DeMuth 1993). These values and concerns are communicated through the marketing materials of the CSA, so that consumers are able to assess the level of values congruence (Posner and Schmidt 1993) between themselves and the CSA.

For many CSA members, buying food is not a low involvement purchase. Many of these consumers want to know where their food comes from, the growing practices that are used, their food production’s carbon footprint, and information about how farm workers are treated, values that are shared with CSAs. These
concerns are often phrased in terms of risks that consumers are taking for themselves, their families, communities, and planet earth. The desire to manage these perceived risks, coupled with the lack of trust in the industrial agricultural system, and emergent beliefs that this system imposes sub-optimal outcomes on them, have led some consumers to seek out alternative purchasing opportunities (Thompson 2005). These consumers recognize their desires as well as their efficacy in the market system and seek out, find, and/or create purchasing opportunities that suit their needs.

CSA members balance risks by trading those they feel they cannot monitor for risks that are more manageable or at least closer to home. For example, when choosing to buy produce from a CSA rather than a grocery store, they trade uncertainty about how the produce was grown, and where it really came from, for the uncertainty that the weather in their region will be good enough during the growing season so that the farmer can actually grow produce to give to them. Other CSA members may choose to pay for the “hidden costs” of their food rather than live with the lack of information about how much petroleum has been used in the growing and transport of their produce (environmental concerns). By engaging in these activities to manage and control risk, consumers take a proactive and participatory role in creating a marketplace that fits their needs. They show themselves as able to leave the dominant social paradigm for an alternative that is a better fit for their needs and their personal values, and they show that they are able to participate in transformative activities on their own, outside the mainstream marketplace. CSAs are participatory market structures insofar as they are highly responsive to consumer concerns, and in turn, use their consumers as drivers of CSA marketing materials.

The value of the product purchased from the CSA goes beyond the produce itself, to include the emotional properties (“feel good” effects), the fit with their personal values (value congruence, see (Kallithi et al. 1999)), and the linking value of the product (Cova 1997) that joins the consumers with each other, and with their broader communities. The CSA is then positioned as an organization that fulfills a variety of needs for the consumer, from minimizing risk, to reinforcing personal values, to being a connection through which the consumer can participate in the immediate community. At no point do these consumers give up their efficacy for getting what they want from the marketplace. In fact, through their experiences with the CSA community, consumers find even more opportunities to engage in alternative purchasing behavior.

Interviews with 35 CSA members illustrate how these consumers use this alternative market mechanism, and what they gain from it. These consumers do not accept that their only option for food purchasing is their local grocery store, or even that the best option is the organic selection available at the grocery store. Rather, they have joined a grass-roots subculture, built on co-creation between producers (farmers) and consumers (CSA members). CSA members have opportunities to go to the farm and see the actual place where their food comes from, which allows them to assess the “hidden costs” of their food, as well as to learn about growing practices the farm uses. These consumers also take home extremely fresh produce (often harvested less than 24 hours before they receive it), which they highly value for perceived taste differences, improved storage quality, and the belief that the food is not only good for them, but also helps keep money in their local economy and is good for the planet.

Unlike traditional views of values and value congruence, values in CSAs are not static systems (Schwartz and Bilsky 1987). CSA members demonstrate an iterative evolution in their personal values, and in the importance they place on the products they receive from the CSA and the market structure. By going outside of the mainstream market and purchasing produce from farmers who they know, from a farm they can actually visit, CSA members assuage several of the risks that come with mass-produce food (Rampton and Staub 2001). What is perhaps most interesting, though, is the personal transformations that CSA members experience, which seem to be strongly influenced by the co-creative process of the community, coupled with the evolution of values. These changes include differences in eating habits, thinking about food and health, preparation of food, the way food is consumed (i.e., with other people vs. alone), and the role of food preparation and meals in the household.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is just one example of ways in which consumers can change the marketplace by choosing not to be involved in typical options. Through this assertion of their needs, consumers drive change, and create new market opportunities that better address their concerns about the products they are buying. CSAs provide us with an opportunity to enrich our understanding of the role of the consumer in TCR.

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This paper explores the competing consumption ideologies of personal responsibility and social welfare and shows how these constructs are not on opposite ends of a continuum, but instead are multi-faceted and domain specific. This theoretical argument extends beyond the specific empirical context we explore here, namely rural community recovery after a disaster, to show how conflicts over consumption ideologies are a necessary condition for community recovery.

In August of 2005, a tornado hit a rural community (pop. ~1500) in the Mountain West. Two people died, 25 percent of the population was left homeless, and the disaster was declared a state and national emergency. Focus group and depth interview data gathered from January through November 2006 serve as the primary data for analysis, while newspaper accounts and other written materials since the time of the tornado are used to illuminate the context. Our discovery-oriented approach was guided by a desire to employ and extend theory (Wells 1993) and by a desire to improve human welfare (Ger 1997; Murray and Ozanne 1991). The theory developed here illuminates competing consumption ideologies and describes how the nature of a market mediates the disaster recovery process.

Data show that residents of this community did not just passively accept external mandates and consumption constraints; instead, they actively and constructively resisted the domination of (1) the tornado and (2) the disaster relief procedures, often referred to as the second disaster (Myers 2008). Guiding residents’ grassroots recovery efforts were two competing consumption ideologies. A consumption ideology is a system of meaning reflected in attitudes and behaviors that aim to maintain the interests of dominate groups in society (Hirschman 1993). To understand the competing ideologies, we must first understand the form and content of each ideology and then see how these ideas are reflected in the actions guiding recovery efforts. In this situation, competing ideologies were evident in (1) specific consumption behaviors that helped move people toward a changed state of existence, (2) conscious decisions to deviate from the expected (e.g., breaking rules set by FEMA), and (3) in the rhetoric of the conflict between the victims and policy-setting groups in the community.

The central assumption of the ideology of personal responsibility is that individuals should take care of their own problems, or “Cowboy Up” as locals would say. This ideology was reflected in
the rhetoric and actions witnessed during the recovery process: a quick clean up conducted almost entirely by resources available within the community; beliefs about whether people should have had or should now have insurance; taking storm spotting classes to empower one’s self to spot tornados; and so forth.

The ideology of social welfare is to take care of your neighbor and those less fortunate, as reflected when the locals say, “we may be out here in the middle of nowhere, but we’re out in the middle of nowhere together.” In tornado recovery, this ideology was reflected in perceptions that those who were more victimized (less fortunate) needed more care and illustrated when community members came together to account for victims; help reunite families with their belongings; help sort valuable from valueless objects; dispose of rubbish; donate goods; volunteer time; etc.

Consumption ideologies address problems of identity construction and reconstruction and guide decisions on how to resolve conflicts (Arnould and Thompson 2005). In this community, solutions to problems about identity reconstruction at both the individual and community level and about conflict between victims and policy makers were developed at the grassroots level, which is consistent with FEMA’s guiding principle that disasters are local. To understand how solutions evolved and how competing ideologies were operationalized, it is important to understand the nature of the market in Wright. Wright is a relatively isolated community with limited services including one general contractor and one grocery store. Wright residents were already in the habit of going elsewhere to have their consumption needs met. In addition, most community members are employed in mining and ranching and possess the skills and equipment common to those industries (e.g., disaster training, heavy equipment such as tractors and dump trucks). In other words, Wright has a mobile population with mobile resources. The nature of the market in Wright mediates the lifestyles of the ‘hunters and gatherers’ who reside there. In some ways, these market conditions facilitated recovery because people were not dependent on the market to provide for their necessities. In other ways, these market conditions mandating independence detracted from recovery, as people thought they should be able to take care of themselves, which is difficult when one is in a fog and has limited resources (85% of victims were uninsured).

When one compares this community’s experience to what we know about recovery in larger communities, we can understand why recovery is so difficult. For example, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans two weeks after this tornado struck. Though people in this community are relatively recovered, at least from a market and consumption standpoint, residents in New Orleans appear to continue to struggle. People are still undecided about purchasing or leaving FEMA trailers, etc. The difference in recovery is in part explained by the nature of the market. In New Orleans, people were totally dependent on the market to provide for their needs; whereas in this community, residents were used to employing market resources as inputs to the process of fending for themselves. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, not only does the market mediate the lifestyle, it mediates the ideologies underlying that lifestyle and the way in which individual and community identity construction and reconstruction occurs.

“Social Strain as an Antecedent of Innovativeness among Subsistence Consumers”

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Transformative consumption and innovativeness are virtually inseparable. That is to say, consumers involved in transformative consumption creatively extract meaning and benefit from products or services and transform both themselves and the product in the process. We can consequently think of transformative consumption as depending on 1) consumers recombining past knowledge and experience into novel arrays and 2) on those arrays producing valued outcomes, i.e., on consumers being innovative (e.g., Amabile 1996). Moreover, transformative consumption and innovativeness do not have to be discontinuous and occur more frequently than most people imagine. To recognize the ubiquity of transformative consumption we need look no further than the behaviors of consumers in resource constrained environments, noting how they create beneficial artifacts from what others discard, and transform their lives through the process.

Inquiry into consumer innovativeness has a long history in consumer research (e.g., Hirschman 1980, Ram and Jung 1989 and 1994, Price and Ridgway 1983, Ridgway and Price 1994, Burroughs and Mick 2004, Moreau and Dahl 1995), and has given us valuable insight into the process and its antecedents and consequences. Recurring themes are that innovativeness is draining and risky. Consumer innovativeness involves taking products and services beyond the uses for which they were engineered. In addition, consumers that engage in the innovative redefinition of artifacts work outside their domains of expertise, and learn about the possibilities and boundaries of their novel arrays through experimentation. All innovative consumers engage in such risky concerted efforts; and in the case of resource constrained consumers the risks may be more pronounced. Driven by survival needs and resources constraints, many poor consumers engage in creative endeavors daily. Moreover, they often place a higher proportion of their limited resources at risk in innovative experiments than more affluent consumers.

In order to gain a better understanding of innovativeness among subsistence consumers, we conducted exploratory ethnographic studies in several countries, in both rural and urban contexts. Participants were first asked to identify members of their communities who they felt engaged in innovative behaviors. Once identified, we interviewed those considered to be innovative and documented both their creations and their development process. We also inquired into what inspired them, what they sought to accomplish, and the general history surrounding their innovations. We learned much about the trial and error process by which they develop products to sell in the marketplace and services to augment their products, and how they persist in innovative behaviors to sustain or improve their businesses. We also learned much about their feelings, triumphs, disappointments, and aspirations.

One lens through which to view the innovativeness of subsistence consumers is Agnew’s General Strain Theory (1992). The theory argues that consumers who engage in innovative behavior do so to cope with negative emotions caused by social inequality and disappointment or frustration with their own social position. Although individuals may experience many types of strain (i.e. economic, environmental, and emotional) during the course of their lives, innovative behavior is more likely to be observed from individuals who believe their current undesirable state is due to circumstances beyond their control. For example, subsistence consumers who adopt specific goals (i.e. financial stability, education for children) may resort to innovative behaviors that push existing technologies in new directions because they see themselves as having no other options (Agnew 1992). They work around the system because they believe the system will not provide them with opportunities to advance their social status. In modern societies, moreover, the strain can be exacerbated if consumers are exposed to media images that suggest the consumption of certain products will lead to more idyllic lifestyle. A gap between the culturally-induced aspirations of the poor and their opportunities for achieving them forces innovative subsistence consumers to develop their own...
methods of obtaining or approximating (through do-it-yourself concoctions) the branded consumer goods shown in the media. Unfortunately, they often do so without awareness of the dangers of product misuse or abuse, or the toxicity of the ingredients used to create the goods.

At the level of the individual level, we find that engaging in addition to the transformations that innovativeness in consumption can entail, innovative behaviors can provide relief from negative affect such as status frustration. According to Agnew (1992), consumers experience status frustration when they recognize a gap between status expectations and actual achievement, and the frustration (negative affect) triggers pressure for corrective action as an avoidance mechanism. The pressure can in fact be a stronger motivator for consumer innovativeness than their desire for transformative outcomes. One informant, for example, compromised his family’s income and well-being. “It seems plausible that the process by which his innovations were created provided him with a release from status frustration that was more valuable than the product itself. More than one of the subsistence consumers we encountered engaged in similar behavior, and we continue to distill the factors that influence whether or not innovative behavior as a coping strategy can become dysfunctional.

At a macro level we also find that not all instances of transformative consumption and innovativeness are positive, in part because the innovation process among poor consumers is inextricably social. Most poor consumers engage in innovation to benefit their families directly or to create transformative experiences they can sell to others, and the boundaries between being a producer and a consumer are fuzzy. To improve their creations, innovators rely on a continuous flow of conversation with customers. These conversations may be used to discuss existing products, possible new products, or to generate transformative problem solutions. One unfortunate consequence of this informal process is that experimentation with existing products is seldom conducted in controlled environments and therefore lacks the necessary safeguards. Suggestions arising from conversations are quickly tested but seldom documented, and the outcomes are better remembered than the process that yields them. In addition, when new product concepts prove to be ineffective or harmful, it is those closest to the innovator who may pay the price because they are often the guinea pigs used to test them. Moreover, the disposal of experiments gone awry is often done with the same abandon as the experimentation, contaminating their home environments and those of neighbors and further eroding the subsistence consumers’ already fragile health.

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