Recycling: Yes But Caring For My Loved Ones First! Exploring Identity Conflicts Amongst “Green” Working Mothers

Iain Black, The University of Edinburgh, UK
Helene Cherrier, Griffith University, Australia

The study explores how working mothers modify their disposal practices - from heavy waste generation to limited waste and recycling. The analysis reveals that becoming a green consumer is related to new disposal practices and sustainable disposal is managed through assimilation, negotiation or rejection processes; each contingent upon social roles.

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also usually produced during the weekend meals and moved along during the weekday dinners. Therefore the leftovers “are moved horizontally” from a weekday dinner to another weekday dinner and are “moved vertically”, down, in the weekly structure of the meals from a higher position to a lower one “weekend meals-weekday dinners”, “weekday dinner-weekday lunch”.

A second finding confirms that disposal is an act of affiliation to the family. Participants perceive leftovers consumption as a sacrifice, a thrift practice (Miller 1998), consisting of saving resources to be donated to an object of devotion. Indeed participants describe their consumption of leftovers as a sacrifice wherein hybrid food is transformed and re-used for a meal. This concept of ‘hybrid food’ encapsulates food that is neither clean nor dirty (Douglas 1984 [1966]) having been displayed previously, but not yet been cast out. Consumption of this hybrid food requires a higher degree of affiliation to the family than clean food. Resources (such as time, effort and money) saved in reusing leftovers are then invested in extraordinary food consumption, such as family celebrations, wherein the family is celebrated as an object of devotion. As others point out, in such extraordinary occasions, intimate and non intimate guests are admitted to celebrate the family. What has not been underlined is that it is not only in extraordinary food consumption that family is celebrated; rather it is in the everyday sacrifice of consuming leftovers that the affiliation to the family is reinforced and perpetuated.

This paper contributes to the current consumer research on disposal in two ways. Firstly it highlights how divestment practices are incorporated in the circular process of domestic food consumption. Moving leftovers along reveals not simply the participants’ weekly hierarchical pattern of the meals but also the circular process of saving resources in ordinary meals and spending such resources in extraordinary meals. Indeed the sacrifice of consuming leftovers by family members is addressed to produce excess value which will be spent in extraordinary food occasions wherein the family as a whole entity is celebrated. Secondly this paper highlights that consuming leftovers requires a high degree of affiliation to the family, and only family members are admitted to a meal based on leftovers. Thus it is not only in extraordinary food occasions that family members reaffirm their affiliation to the household, but it is also in their everyday sacrifice that they reconstitute their object of devotion, which is the family itself.

Recycling: Yes but caring for my loved ones first!

Exploring Identity Conflicts amongst “Green” Working Mothers

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Researchers have documented that professional working mothers experience conflicting personal and social expectations. On the one hand, they strive toward self-directed accomplishments such as professional development; and on the other hand, they try to preserve traditional motherhood values for care of the children (Thompson 1996). In managing these conflicting expectations, these supermothers often opt for unsustainable consumption practices such as convenience consumption (Reilly 1982; Reilly and Wallendorf 1987) or buying pre-processed foods (Thompson 1996). As these women experience accelerated time frame, they do not often have to time and energy to integrate sustainable waste management in their lifestyle (Godbey et al. 1998).

This research considers the notions of juggling lifestyles and identity conflicts for professional working mothers who, with the goal of consuming in a more sustainable fashion, had recently diminished the amount of waste they generate and had integrated recycling as their main disposal practice. This group typically has multiple roles and identities, such as mother, wife, homemaker, employee, and friend. We conducted in-depth interviews with six middle and upper class, professional working mothers, who lived in Toronto and moved away from wasteful practices, deliberately lowered their household waste generation and integrated recycling into their lives as a daily chore. By studying this group and probing on reasons for changing their practice of disposal, insights were gained into how recycling and sustainable waste management are performed and how such practices are influenced by self and social positions. Our analysis revealed how sustainable disposal (lower waste generation and recycling) is achieved by assimilation, negotiation or rejection.

It is clear that the findings can be effectively represented and understood using a framework of identity conflicts and strategies used to manage these conflicts (Swann 1987, Murray 2002, Ahuvia 2005). The mothers demonstrated a high level of knowledge and commitment to performing a wide range of sustainable behaviors. As well as being aware of the general concerns about the state of the ecosystem, they talked in detail about specific environmental issues such as greenhouse gas emissions, rubbish disposal and pollution in air, water and food. They also discussed what they saw as the consequences of these issues, with global warming and health problems attributed to specific concerns. It was also common for a clear link to be made between environmental concerns, the potential consequences of this and their motivation to act (based on their identity as mothers). Interestingly, few mentions were made about wanting to reduce overall consumption levels, though informants did want to reduce the impact of this consumer lifestyle and dispose accordingly. It was clear that the informants want to remain within the current consumer-est society but also want it reformed. For the informants, one of the most accessible changes toward sustainability was to modify their practice of disposal. All informants integrated practices of recycling and reduced the household waste production. It was issues surrounding motherhood such as pregnancy, birth of a baby or pressure from their children that motivated these changes.

Each informant discussed how within their daily lives they performed several different roles; which contributed to a range of different social positions. It is conflict between the behaviors and values inherent within social positions and the subsequent management of this conflict that, it is argued here, can help explain change in disposal practices: moving from heavy waste generation and throwing away to limited waste generation and recycling. When exploring the conflicts and how these working mothers manage to integrate recycling in their daily routines, we did not find Ahuvia’s (2005) “Demarcating,” “Compromising” and “Synthesizing” strategies. Rather, when managing conflicting social positions between mother, professional worker and green consumer, our informants’ interviews expressed an “assimilation” strategy. Sustainable disposal by “assimilation” is a process of rejecting, accepting or modifying the new disposal practice where rather than leading to the negotiated merging of the conflicting identities (as present in Ahuvia’s synthesizing approach), values and meanings of sustainable disposal, are assimilated into prominent “core” identities without changing them. This allows respondents to reduce their amount of waste and the adoption of recycling to occur within personally and socially acceptable boundaries.

The respondents described how despite disposing of modes of behavior that they had performed for many years and then adopted different practices, they had not changed to become other identities such as radical conservationists nor had their identity as a mother changed. For example, Katherine talked about stopping the waste linked to using strong chemical household cleaners. In order to mod-
ify her waste production, she started using vinegar and baking soda but in doing so, the meaning of this sustainable disposal practices was assimilated into her conceptualization of herself as a mother without changing it. Here we have an example of sustainable disposal without disposing of the meaning of the practice; instead some of the meaning is transferred on to a new behavior that does not cause conflict between her multiple roles. Assimilation appears to occur because of the hierarchical nature of the conflicting identities and the central importance of motherhood to these women’s sense of self. These properties do not exist in Ahuvia’s examination of loved objects (2005) or Mick and Fournier’s (1998) technical paradoxes.

REFERENCES