On the Question of Altruism Vs. Self-Interest in Ethical Consumption, and on Why This Question Might Not Really Matter

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We suggest that questions of whether ethical consumption is driven by “true altruism” or “self-interest” are ill-posed, since such questions are based on the assumption of a separated self. Instead, we suggest that an alternative view of an interconnected self can advance our understanding of ethical consumerism.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009780/volumes/v39/NA-39

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On the Question of Altruism vs. Self-Interest in Ethical Consumption, And On Why This Question Might Not Really Matter

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Do consumers consume ethically because they truly care for the well-being of others or out of more selfishly oriented desires to be perceived in a favorable light? Previous research has pointed towards the predominance of identity projects in anti-consumption practices (Cherrier 2009). For example, consumers boycott companies to express their individuality and for moral self-realization (Kozinets and Handelman 1998), and consumer activists construct morally superior identities (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). In these accounts, ethical behavior is presented as rooted in self-interested concerns of self-transformation or the creation of hero identities (Cherrier 2009).

Other investigations have explored self-sacrificing caring dimension of consumption (Thompson 1996) and how sharing has a component of care for others (Belk 2010). Research on citizen consumerism has extended these caring orientations into non-family contexts without exploring in detail the interplay between self-interested desires for favorable identities and desires to benefit the well-being of distant others (McGinnis and Gentry 2009).

When does caring for others become self-serving through establishing a caring identity? We suggest that questions like this, which call for the disentanglement of altruistic and selfish motives, are ill-posed, since they are based on the assumption that each individual is a separated entity apart from other people (Gergen 2009). While this understanding is certainly dominant in contemporary Western culture, an alternative view of the self that is based on the assumption that everyone is connected to everyone and everything else (Capra 1996) has become more influential over recent years due to a growing awareness of the interconnections in our physical world (e.g., ecological systems, social networks; Rifkin 2009).

Rather than continuing the quest of disentangling “true altruism” from “self-interest” and the related quest of drawing boundaries between self-interest and caring for others, we argue that our understanding of ethical consumerism would be advanced by taking into account different perspectives of the self and how relationships between self and others are conceptualized (i.e., separated self vs. interconnected self). Specifically, the purpose of our research is to expose beliefs of interconnectedness in consumer activists’ narratives and to explore how this worldview allows consumers to care for the wellbeing of others.

We conducted a netnography of various webpages associated with the Transition Movement (TM). Four major webpages that serve as global info and discussion hubs of the TM served as our main data source.

We found the beliefs of interconnectedness to be a hotly debated issue within the TM. Those who subscribed to these beliefs frequently rejected the atomistic view of individuals (e.g., “a shift in consciousness” that “gives the lie to old-paradigm notions of the isolated, competitive self”) and instead saw their own well-being as dependent on and “inseparable from the well being of all the people, plants, and creatures that we affect and that affect us”. Furthermore, we registered a second theme of individual empowerment. Based on beliefs that the current state of the world is an outcome of the cascading effects of interconnected relationships and choices, members of the TM located responsibility for the world as well as the power to change the world in everyone’s personal reach (e.g., “taking responsibility for our individual power to create the world”). Such localization of responsibility was connected with an awareness to avoid vilifying others (e.g., corporations or mainstream consumers) as ‘evil’, in part out of a realization that the world can be changed on the level of positive, individual connections among individuals.

Our findings contribute to the ethical consumption literature by questioning the core assumptions of separated individuals when analyzing why and how people engage in caring consumption. But more broadly, our study complements and extends recent explorations of the relational self (e.g., Epp and Price 2008) by addressing the question to “what extent the self is best conceptualized as extended [...] versus part of an organic unity with others and the environment” (Belk 2010, p. 728). As we demonstrate in this research, some consumers indeed adopt the latter perspective, which has implications for why they care for others, how they relate their caring consumption to their self-interest, and how they attempt to create social change. Last, our finding that members of the TM transcend dualistic notions of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ point towards the possibility that such dualisms may be only a structural feature of identity construction (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010) if the self is conceptualized as separated from others, but less so when people adopt an understanding of the self as being interconnected with other people and with the natural world at large.

REFERENCES