Forced Transformation and Consumption Practices in Liquid Times

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This paper proposes an alternative framework for understanding forced transformations and consumption practices. This framework accounts for the uncertainty that accompanies such identity transformations, and the role of consumption practices during transformation pathways. The study focuses on the homeless experience, where forced and uncertain events disrupt individuals’ entire lives.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Literature Review

Throughout life, consumers experience many changes that can impact on and transform their identities. Some of these changes occur naturally as individuals move through their lives (e.g. becoming an adult), while others are the result of more conscious decisions made by individuals (e.g. getting married). From a consumer behaviour perspective, studies have analyzed the support that possessions and consumption practices offer individuals (functionally and/or emotionally) during these changes that are associated with fairly defined points in consumers’ lives (McAlexander, 1991, Ozanne, 1992, Curasi et al., 2004, Schouten, 1991b).

An analysis of consumer behaviour studies examining individuals’ transformations highlights the prominence of Van Gennep’s model of Rites of Passages as a framework to describe and understand these transitions (see for example Curasi et al., 2004, Ozanne, 1992, Young, 1991, Schouten, 1991a). While these studies have provided useful insights into the consumption practices associated with identity transitions, in our understanding Van Gennep’s framework does not reflect the evolution of individuals’ identity development and performance. Specifically, the framework is not suitable for situations where transformational outcomes are uncertain and/or forced, i.e. where transformations do not have a clearly defined end-state.

Bauman (2000, 2007) has suggested that society has reached a postmodern (‘liquid’) era in which the social forms cannot keep their shape for long (Bauman, 2007, p. 1). As a result, there is higher uncertainty surrounding individuals’ transformations (McCracken, 2008). Building on Hill’s work on individual’s experiences of homelessness (Hill and Stamey, 1990, p. 96) and extended periods of poverty (Hill, 2001) as triggers of a reconfiguration of the sense of self, this paper focuses on the homeless experience, in which forced and uncertain changing events disrupt individuals’ entire life. In so doing, this paper proposes an alternative framework that takes into account the uncertainty that accompanies forced transformations, and the role of consumption during the transformation pathways.

Method

A phenomenological study was adopted, focussing on the specific events that led informants into a state of homelessness. The study was developed as a two-stage process. First, a twelve-month quasi-ethnographical study (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003) where the lead author volunteered for a charity that supports homeless individuals. Second, long interviews were conducted and focused on homeless people’s retrospective biographical narratives about the events that led them into a homeless state. The combined database (16 interviews with homeless individuals, and a research journal of the quasi-ethnography study) was analyzed and interpreted using existential phenomenological procedures (Thompson, 1997, Thompson et al., 1989).

FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The study findings reveal a four-stage process of forced self-transformation that takes place across two stressful situations: the triggering events that led informants to lose their home, and their further survival in a homeless state (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Process of Forced Self-Transformation

Source: the authors

a. Initial self-concept

This initial stage refers to the informants’ state before the triggering events occurred. All informants’ narratives of their lives before entering the pathway to homelessness reflect them as being relatively stable, comprising multiple identifications that together comprised their dominant initial self-concept.

b. Forced identity negotiation

This stage relates to the reactions individuals had while the triggering events occurred, as well as the changes that their identities went through. According to informants’ narratives when the trigger events occurred, they initially believed it was a transient situation. Therefore, and despite the uncertainty that surrounded those moments, their initial reaction was to: a) use their remaining economic and social resources (e.g. savings, friends, family) to avoid losing their home, and b) manage the meaning of their possessions to continue performing their identities (Black, 2011).

However, informants realized their homeless situation was not transient and this created a major identity continuity disruption. Informants’ narratives reflect a forced identity negotiation processes associated with the identities they wanted to perform and ones they could actually perform. This in turn was related to the props (i.e. possessions and/or practices) they had to support those identities including: the meaning of the remaining possessions, how they supported their identities, and what they could do with them in their current situation.

c. Transition

This stage relates to the individuals’ confrontation with the consequences of the triggering events. Individuals realized that homelessness was an enduring state and the props they had imagined would assist them to cope with their situation were no longer reliable or available. Their narratives reflect they entered in a transitional state, in which they felt grief for their past; doubts about who they were at that time; and uncertainty about what they would become in the future. In order to cope with the situation, individuals’ activities focused on their day-to-day survival including: where to find food (e.g. scavenging), how to obtain money (e.g. begging) and where to spend the night (e.g. sleeping on benches).

Authors have highlighted how consumption activities and possessions help individuals address the ambiguity during transitional times (Noble and Walker, 1997, Fischer and Gainer, 1993, Banister and Piacentini, 2008, Schouten, 1991b). In this specific context, informants relied on different adaptive strategies that helped them to relieve their anxiety. These strategies include compulsive consump-
tion behaviours and/or certain routines that help informants to escape from their current conditions (e.g. walking, reading, drinking).

d. Self-concept transformation

This stage relates to the individuals’ reinvention of their self-concept, based on their past experience and their current situation. The informants’ narratives reveal how their experience on the streets, and the consumption practices they were forced to perform to survive, helped them to develop new identities. Individuals experience tensions between their past and present self, whose solution can be characterized using Ahuvia’s (2005) synthesizing strategy. Both new identities and previous ones evolved, forcing individuals to reinterpret their past, present, and envision lives based on their homelessness experience (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Effect of the trigger event as reflected through informants’ past and present narratives**

CONCLUSION

Our study describes the forced self-transformation process individuals experience in their pathway to homelessness. This process represents a framework to facilitate the navigation of this type of transformation and to understand how at times of uncertain life changes consumption practices become key elements in individuals’ self-development. Consumption practices served initially as symbols during the forced identity negotiation process. Subsequently, and although these practices did not emerge as identity-laden (day to day survival), they became with time the source for constructing a new self.

REFERENCES


