Nuances of Cooperation and Competition Among Lower-Class Consumers

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This paper aims to analyze how lower-class consumers engage in communal relationships. Drawing from Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social capital we conducted an ethnography of a squatter neighborhood in Brazil. Findings reveal a broad opposition between cooperative and competitive relationships, which arise from a combination of moral, structural, and situational conditions.

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ABSTRACT
The marketing discipline has recently displayed an increasing concern over lower-class consumers, giving rise to two overarching bodies of research. In the first, studies aim to design solutions for the alleviation of consumers’ impoverished conditions, either through the market (e.g., Prahalad and Hammond, 2002), public policy (e.g. Varman, Skalen, and Belk, 2012; Viswanathan et al., 2012), or community entrepreneurship (e.g., Viswanathan, Rosa and Ruth, 2010). In the second, researchers seek to primarily understand the lived experiences of the dominated (Üstüner and Holt, 2007), vulnerable (Backer, Gentry, and Rittenburg, 2005), or simply put, poor consumers (Hill 2002). In both sets, studies attribute great importance to communal relationships and the social networks of these consumers either as a key to cope (Hill 2001; Hill and Stephens, 1997) and overcome objective conditions of deprivation (London, Anupindi and Sheth, 2010), or as the grounds from which identity projects will be produced (Üstüner and Holt, 2007). The underlying assumption is often that people experiencing similar conditions of deprivation would share a sense of collectivity and develop forms of cooperation and solidarity as belonging to the same class or “culture” (Bourdieu 1979; Hoggart 1970). However, the same social conditions that foster a sense of solidarity, can also originate tensions and competitive feelings and behaviors among social groups (Portes 1998).

Extant sociological literature has found evidences of this more “heterogeneous array of behaviors and outcomes” regarding communal relationships among poor people (Small, Harding, and Lamont, 2010: 15). Studies have shown the diverse circumstances in which they choose not to participate in communitarian projects (Small 2002), avoid help their peers (Smith 2010), and openly engage in competitive and conflictive relationships among each other (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). In the same vein, but in different types of collectivities, consumer research has described tensions in communal relationships. For example, in a study of home moving practices, Marcoux (2009) has shown that consumers would rather opt to contract commercial moving services instead of asking their network of friends for favors, which would generate a need for “reciprocity”. In a study of commercial climbing expeditions, Tumbat and Belk (2011) have described how the temporary community formed around a common objective was, contrary to the usual liminal camaraderie, fully permeated by competitive and individualistic feelings. As these evidences in and outside poor collectivities indicate, studies of social relationships put the attention on one side or the other, but fail to integrate both dimensions and give a more complete picture of these relations. Could cooperation and competitive dimensions be substitutable or complementary? What are the specific conditions for engaging in one or the other?

We seek to understand these apparent contradictions through the analysis of the conditions in which lower-class consumers engage in cooperative-solidarity versus competitive-individualistic relationships. Drawing from Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social capital as “the aggregate of actual and/or potential resources that are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (1986: 249), we have conducted an ethnography of the daily interactions in a group of lower-class consumers living in a squatter neighborhood in Brazil. Social capital is “a system of durable obligations,” which are socially constructed within any collectivity from norms of reciprocity (Mathwick, Wierz, and Ruyter, 2008), bounded solidarity, and enforceable trust (Portes 1998). At the same time, social capital can generate both positive (e.g., help to overcome objective conditions of impoverishment) and negative (e.g., excessive claims over a few community members and restriction of personal freedom) outcomes (Portes 1998). We seek to understand how our informants frame this system of obligation and anticipate it’s outcomes in the context of their daily relationships at the community level. In doing so, they engage in diverse market-mediated forms of cooperation and competition among each other. Through the thick description of each of the identified relationships, we account for the underlying moral, structural, and situational conditions of those relationships and advance on the understanding of the communal relationships among disadvantaged consumers.

This study echoes the recent calls in Transformative Consumer Research, which proposes to leverage trust and social capital in the context of poverty (Blocker et al., 2012). Our contribution is three-fold: first, we challenge the dominant view of lower-class consumers as being necessarily cooperative when facing objective conditions of impoverishment; second, we enhance the understanding on the ways lower-class consumers protect and take advantage of their social network through the use of market resources; additionally, our accounting for social capital broadens the perspective of the research on sociability and reciprocity in consumer culture theory, beyond the often dyadic notions of the gift economy (Giesler 2006).

CONTEXT AND METHOD
Despite experiencing economic growth for over a decade, Brazil still faces strong social inequality. Lower-classes (those occupying the two lowest tiers in a rank with eight income-classes) vary from 36% to 42% of the households in the country, depending on the classification adopted, with a monthly income not higher than US$183 per member of the household (Kamakura and Mazzon, 2013). Beyond income classifications, the modernization process of the country has produced a deep structural gap of access to education and other kinds of relevant impersonal capitals between the lower- and middle-classes, the first composed by those individuals mainly holding positions of manual workers (Souza 2010). Over six months, we have conducted an ethnography of the daily life of six families belonging to this lower-class group, living in a squatter neighborhood in a Brazilian state capital.

Brazilian cities provide an interesting context for research on lower-class consumers for many reasons: (1) Brazilian lower-class usually faces long-term poverty, experienced during several generations, which is considered a base for the transmission of certain forms of capitals (Bourdieu 1979); (2) squatter areas are known for being dense spaces for sociability and communal relationships; and (3) lower-classes are directly benefiting from recent economic growth, objectively increasing consumption patterns, therefore having an impact in daily and communal life (Souza 2010). As our research site unites these features, it provides an extreme context that allows to foreground our theoretical argument (Price, Arnould, and Moisio, 2007).

Fieldwork was conducted by the first author. Data collection was composed of participatory observation of the daily routine of six families at home, with neighbors, and in their interactions with local shops and services. During the six months of fieldwork, three to four
days a week, during different hours, were spent in the neighborhood, observing daily interactions and taking part in many dinners, birthday parties, and social gatherings inside the neighborhood. The first author also lived in the neighborhood for 15 days at the very end of the fieldwork. Four sets of in-depth interviews were conducted with the head of the families and one interview with each member of the families, totaling 43 consumer interviews. We also mapped all 49 local commerce points and interviewed the owners of the seven mains business, such as grocery and hardware stores. In total, data collection was registered in 83 single-space pages of field journal notes, 1,000 minutes of audio, transcribed in 181 single-space pages of text, 17 minutes of video, 232 pictures taken, and 30 pictures collected from informants. Data analysis followed the guidelines of the hermeneutical approach (Thompson 1997), evolving our understanding of the social relations within the neighborhood through several part-to-whole interactions, from emic to etic perspectives. As we evolved in our interpretation of the data, we grouped the diverse communal relationships found into four distinct forms of cooperation or competition, which we further describe and discuss in the following parts of this paper.

**FINDINGS**

We have identified four broad dimensions of social capital relationships among our informants (see table 1). For each dimension, we depart from the description of the relationship, it’s practices and discourses associated, and explain the combination of moral (norms and values), structural (durable conditions of impoverishment), and situational (immediate context of social and personal relations) conditions that make it possible in the context of the localized relationships. Finally, we understand its relations with consumption and markets, as well as the consequences at the community level. Although all forms are present among our informants, we chose to present each one through the story of a single and illustrative case.

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**Strong Reciprocity**

Strong reciprocity comprehends the emotional, bodily and financial engagements directed towards the mutual improvement of life conditions, especially among family members sharing the same household. Family is a primary unit of social capital relations among the poor (Viswanathan, Sridharan, and Ritchie, 2010), as Silvia (55 years old) provides best example. She migrated from the countryside with no formal education and relied on a few friends to get her first jobs, first at the assembly line, and then as cleaning lady. Silvia incarnerates the identified relationship by engaging in daily sacrifices to improve life conditions within the family core.

Now both my kids are working. But Carlo [her son] needs to change, because his job [as garbage collector] is terrible. They only give him one set of clothes and I don’t have the heart to let him go with the same clothes two days in a row. I wash his clothes at the night, and at 4AM I have to dry it on iron. For me is no sacrifice, as a mother my concern is improving. You cannot give up. Do you think I bother sleeping at that mattress there [she sleeps at the mattress so her children can sleep at the bed]? I do not.

This relationship is rooted in the moral obligations among the nuclear family members (Coleman 1988). Silvia feels compelled to
support her children. This support is market-mediated in many ways, such as the daily abundance of food at home, or in the purchase of a new TV set to “conquer their heart”, and in the form of the manual labor illustrated above, which fostered her purchase of a washing machine to automate the laundry task. However, not only are the sons expected to reciprocate, but they are also explicitly socialized as part of this domestic moral economy: “When the tos were still small I got widow. There was only me for everything. I had to pay for day-care. Then, when Carlo started to be able to take care of Keyla I used to say: “watch your little sister, so that will save us more [money] to buy things for you to eat’”. Sharing the same household is the main situational condition for this sense of shared obligations and responsibility to arise, as closeness makes our informants more involved in each other’s lives and as they all concur to the expenses of the house. Those reciprocal obligations are more likely to flourish under limited structural conditions, notably among minimally structured families facing a long term history of economic and educational deprivation. Often, in the less structured families we met, expectations of reciprocity are broken, generating tensions, mutual distrust and resentment among family members. Yet, in more structured and less economically constrained families we met, children are socialized to go to school and their reciprocal obligations move from actively helping at home to develop discipline and prospective behavior dispositions through engaging in studies, closer to middle-class patterns (Souza 2010). Thus, at the same time that strong reciprocity increases short-term access to market goods, it also limits family members’ long-term improvements, especially via education (Portes 1998).

Loose Solidarity

Loose solidarity encompasses the network of favors, referrals, and trades within or outside the community (Coleman 1988). That is the most documented form of social capital relations among the poor, usually represented in a positive tone (Hill and Stephens, 1997; Weidner et al., 2010) and is close to the studies on gift economy (Giesler 2006; Sherry 1983). Lia (37) best illustrates this dimension. She also went to the city searching for job opportunities. In her migration process, she relied on the pioneer relatives to get by the hard beginnings. As Lia, most of the informants remember those favors with gratitude. She currently lives with her two boys (2 and 11) in a well-built brick and mortar house. Maybe because she has received important favors during her trajectory, she keeps helping other neighbors who “deserve it” (Smith 2010). During the fieldwork she referred a neighbor to her boss and helped another to buy a wardrobe by lending her personal credit, a common practice among the lower-class in Brazil (Matosso and Rocha, 2009). She also mentioned that she had morally paid a debt to her boss, for whom she was working for less than her usual earnings after having received an important favor.

The moral underpinnings behind this narrative are (1) the sense of obligation (and entitlement) or compassion with peers (Portes 1998) and (2) the assessment of whether the receiver needs and deserves the favors in the dyadic relation (Smith 2010). Reciprocity is broadly expected and required, feeding the durable obligations among the network (Gouldner 1960). By its turn, the existence of a network of interdependence among the parties is the main structural condition that drives the loose solidarity. It stems from sharing similar objective conditions (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). Additionally, solidarity is performed in priority to close neighbors, friends or employees. This personal closeness goes hand in hand with trust in the other party, which is required more as the favour become more risky, such as in cases involving credit between neighbors and local commerce.

Contrary to the first form, loose solidarity mostly replaces market solutions (donations of goods from inside and outside the communities, helping with maintenance or building of houses, helping with childcare) or increases marketplace participation (lending credit or money, referring to jobs, helping navigate public institutions). However, at the same time that it helps to objectively overcome consumers’ vulnerabilities (Baker et al. 2005), it also reinforces hierarchies and structures of power inside and outside of the community.

Opportunism

The same structural interdependence that fosters loose solidarity also provides the grounds for opportunistic practices among neighbors, as well as among local commerce owners and their customers. Opportunism refers to the possibilities of free-riding, cheating and advantage-taking that our informants deal with in their communitarian daily life. Despite being rather unproblematized in consumer research, this competitive dimension is documented in different instances of communal relations (Portes 1998). Oscar, a local grocery store owner in his 50’s, provides the best examples for such case. He runs the most successful grocery store of the neighborhood for more than a decade. Coming from one of the few relatively wealthy families in the neighborhood, he likes to say that he is very helpful and supportive of his neighbors, which does not spare him from being a major target of opportunism.

The exchanging [of goods in the shop] is a big problem: for example, I know that one can take the milk even after a month [it’s expired]. You know what they say if it is expired on the very day? “The milk is rotten”. Oh, it makes me mad! But, then I wonder: “What if you had bought it there at the Carrefour, would you pay the bus to go there and exchange it?” No, it’s because the fool here will exchange for you. And more, we sometimes see a person stealing from the shop. The worst part is that sometimes it is and old person. But we don’t speak up, you know why? Because they will make a bad face and not come back anymore. An old grandma, man, we never imagined! The woman was taking a dip in her pocket! Gee, how can a person that saw you growing, practically raised you, be stealing a dip from you? What about that person to whom you denied some credit? Like, they think that because they buy from you, you have an obligation to help them in the crunch.

The moral justification underlying those opportunistic behaviors can be found in the feelings of entitlement among members of the community. For those engaging in opportunistic practices, sharing similar conditions would give them the right to similar outcomes. In such closed communities, the emergence of a shared normative structure allows the “less diligent members [to] enforce on the more successful all kinds of demands” (Portes 1998: 16). We witnessed numerous situations in which these claims were made. When a family got one of the first personal computers in the neighborhood for the son, their house was quickly turned into a “public cybercafé”, as the parents complained. In another case, one of our informants complained after a neighbour, who she had lent money to, was caught barbecuing (a status sign in the neighborhood) the next day. Opportunity and timing are among the main situational conditions for such practices. As Oscar says, his costumer don’t exchange merchandise when they buy it from the big supermarket chains in the city. Although opportunism capacitates consumption in the short term, it does so at the expense of the relationship between parties, increasing mistrust among neighbors and undermining businesses in the community.
Distance Managing

Distance managing includes the discourses of valorization of dimensions that differentiate the poor from the “inferior other”, such as a stable formal work, discipline to save money, and ability to raise well-educated children; as well as practices of avoidance of potentially opportunistic or dangerous neighbors. Ilário (56), a retired office clerk, lives with his wife and younger son in a house considered big for the neighborhood. He inherited the land from his father and proudly recounts that he transformed the former small house into a big one without much help. When talking about the relationship with his neighbors he states:

“We do not live together with the neighbors; we only hang out with my sister and with the guys from the market [Grocery Store owners, considered “rich”]. Other houses we have no friendship. Here the purchasing power of the people is very low; then you handle friendships here and then they do not leave your door; biting you, asking you things, disturbing you, then you’d better not have friendship with such people. Then instead of going forward you will only go backwards. Then you say “no” and people get bad face. Then if you do not have friends, you have no way they’ll extort you. My sister has some friends who, now and then, are biting her. This kind of friendship that is biting you does nothing. I avoid, hence the person has no way to reach you.”

The distinction Ilário quickly seeks to make between him and the other neighbors is pervasive among our informants. The discourse here is anchored in a frame of a moral superiority (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013) towards those seen as undisciplined, gossipy, vagabonds, or criminals, in contrast to being an honest worker (Sarti 2005; Zaluar 2000). Structurally, this form stems from the combination of long term shared objective conditions of deprivation and individual experiences of dissonant mobility in the face of intraclass differences in the broad community. Geographical and personal proximity provide the situational conditions for the need to manage distance. The same personal closeness that fosters solidarity, on the one hand, sets the grounds for a network of social comparison, envy, and gossip at the local level, on the other hand. In this dimension the market provides the means to escape the burden of the gift economy (Marcoux 2009) and to state distinctions among peers (Ústünner and Holt, 2007). Distance managing protects individuals and increases status positions of avoiders. In the long term, however, it increases mistrust and breaks the communal mechanisms of reciprocity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper shows that among lower-class consumers, cooperation and competition can be substitutable depending on a specific combination of moral, structural, and situational conditions. Different from previous research (Hill 2002; Tumbat and Belk, 2011), the four identified dimensions are observable among people at the same collectivity. These consumers adapt and engage in one or another form of social capital in order to get the most benefit possible from their communal relations. Moreover, we observed that the same person can engage in different forms of relationship among their community, which extends Saatcioglu and Ozanne’s (2013) account of fixed moral identities among poor consumers. We demonstrated that social capital holds a complex and nuanced nature, as one can not only maintain relationships of solidarity within a group, but also perceive it’s closure as a threat or a source of opportunity, therefore avoiding to help, isolating him or herself, or even taking advantage of other’s good will. This reinforces the idea that social capital can be best understood as a relational system (Portes 1998).

Social capital is usually regarded as a way to establish and maintain a spirit of community in a group (Bourdieu 1986). However, our study shows that collective feelings and belonging are not always desirable. This challenges the dominant view that the poor would necessarily engage in solidarity as a way to cope with and overcome objective conditions of deprivation (Hill 2002; London et al., 2010). For example, we found that opportunism can be also a way to cope and overcome these conditions. Also, social capital is supposed to facilitate collective living (Coleman 1988). However, we found that opportunism and distance managing actually complicate it, mutually reinforcing feelings of resentment and individualism. We contend that future work on lower-class consumers should take this nuanced and complex nature of social capital into account, both to better understand the lived experience of poor consumers and to elaborate solutions for poverty alleviation.

Market resources play a key role on broad social dynamics and processes of identity construction (Thompson 2013). Despite the acknowledged importance of those resources for lower-class communities (Hill 2002), extant literature has left its relationship with social capital relatively untouched. Addressing this shortcoming, we showed that markets and consumption can be (1) the means through which social relationships are constituted (2) the result of a social relationship, where cooperation or competition increase or undermine the access to markets, and (3) can be replaced by a network of favors among neighbors. So, market resources are embedded in different dimensions of communal relationships, which can bring new insights to the body of research on reciprocity in consumer culture theory. As our analysis suggests, the theorization of social capital encompasses elements of both gift-giving (Giesler 2006) and sharing (Belk 2010). Thus, future research can explore social capital as an integrative framework to understand the positive and negative possibilities at the intersection of communal relationships and consumption.

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