Single Mothers in Poverty: Consumption Paradoxes of Stigma Avoidance

Kathy Hamilton, University of Strathclyde, UK

This presentation will focus on single mothers in poverty and the paradoxical nature of their quest to avoid stigmatization and social disapproval. Drawing on exclusion and single mother discourse, it demonstrates how the coping strategies employed to disguise poverty can actually create further stigmatization.

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Countervailing the Effects of Poverty: Individual and Collective Strategies among Impoverished Consumers for Sustainable Well-Being

Chairs: Fredah Mwiti, Lancaster University Management School, UK
Andres Barrios, Lancaster University Management School, UK and Universidad de los Andes, Colombia

Paper #1: Single Mothers in Poverty: Consumption Paradoxes of Stigma Avoidance
Kathy Hamilton, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland

Fredah G Mwiti, Maria Piacentini and Andrew Pressey; Lancaster University, UK

Paper #3: Using Consumption Practices to Counter Vail Stigma Experiences and Transform Self-Identity among the Homeless
Andres Barrios, Lancaster University, UK and Universidad de los Andes, Colombia
Chris Blocker, Baylor University, USA

Paper #4: Vulnerable Consumers: Ethnography of the Consumption of French Farmers Facing Impoverishment
Françoise Passerard, HEC Paris, France
Kristine De Valck, HEC Paris, France
Romain Laufer, HEC Paris, France

SESSION OVERVIEW

Douglas (2007) defines poverty as the inability to maintain the exchanges that define one as a member of the society. Such exchanges are not however limited to economic domains, and as such the effects of poverty on consumers – as well as the mechanisms that impoverished individuals employ to counteract the hardships in their lives – are multifaceted. This special session draws inspiration from the TCR agenda to address substantive issues facing consumers around the world and synthesizes four studies that explore the effects of poverty and impoverished consumers’ efforts to improve their lives.

Each of the papers to be presented relates to completed research projects, and fits with the conference mission of appreciating diversity as they not only explore the effects of poverty from different situational contexts (rural farmers in France, the homeless in the US and UK, slum-dwellers in Kenya, and single mothers in the UK), but also utilize different units of analysis (individual, family, and their broader networks). The papers draw on discussions within the poverty track at a recent TCR dialogue conference, in which the scholars identified five research streams with implications for impoverished inclusion: consumption choice amidst the burdens of poverty, product and service experiences, the effects of consumer culture, adverse marketplace forces, and consumption capabilities (Blocker et al 2011, 2012).

Kathy Hamilton (University of Strathclyde) explores consumption paradoxes of stigma avoidance with single mothers living in poverty in the UK. Fredah Mwiti, Maria Piacentini, (Lancaster University) and Andrew Pressey (Birmingham University) use ethnography to examine the integration of resources within subsistence consumer networks in Kenya. Andres Barrios (Lancaster University) and Chris Blocker (Baylor University) explore the consumption practices that homeless individuals use to counteract the experience of stigma and transform their self-identity in the UK and US. Françoise Passerard investigates the consumption vulnerability of French farmers. Beyond the implications that each individual study poses for poverty-related TCR, together these four studies contribute to dialogue on consumer surprise, irony, and ambivalence. In particular, a 2011 JCR editorial highlights the idea that research could explore ways that consumers are made better or worse off when they experience and act upon surprising thoughts or behaviors (Hsee et al. 2003). The studies in this proposed session make salient consumers’ varying strategies for countervailing the effects poverty, and in doing so, the collective findings reveal paradoxical tensions and feelings of ambivalence. Thus, we anticipate interesting dialogue as to how consumer strategies may ultimately help mitigate their vulnerabilities or exacerbate them. Speakers will have a maximum of 15 minutes each to present their papers. This will ensure that sufficient time is allocated for general audience engagement and discussion.

In sum the session provides a platform for those interested in the intersection of poverty and transformative consumer research to discuss and gain major understanding over the 4 billion plus consumers who live in impoverished conditions. Beyond this, the session will appeal to a wide audience including those who have a theoretical interest in consumer vulnerability, consumer disadvantage, social exclusion, consumer coping, stigma and emerging markets.

Single Mothers in Poverty: Consumption Paradoxes of Stigma Avoidance

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This presentation will focus on single mothers in poverty and the paradoxical nature of their quest to avoid stigmatization and social disapproval. At previous ACR conferences, I have concluded that single mothers can improve their situations and develop self-esteem through initiating various creative strategies to respond to their family’s demands (Hamilton and Catterall 2007, 2008). A re-interpreation of this research reveals that coping strategies which seem functional and effective at the micro level may have unanticipated outcomes if considered within the wider societal context. Thus the coping strategies employed to disguise poverty and aid the portrayal of a socially acceptable image can actually create further stigmatization. This highlights the importance of moving beyond only focusing on the stigma management strategies employed by consumers to also incorporate sociocultural understandings.

This study consists of 24 in-depth interviews in single mother households. A family approach was adopted for the study meaning that children aged 11 and over also participated in interviews. Therefore in 9 households, a family interview was conducted with the mother and her child(ren) and in 16 households the mother was interviewed alone. Interviews were conducted in respondents’ homes and interview topics included everyday life, budgetary strategies, hopes for the future, family background information and financial circumstances. Hermeneutics was used to interpret the data. In this paper, the data interpretation is advanced by using macro social discourse to gain a deeper and more complete understanding of individual experiences. To do so, the lived experience of low-income consumers is considered within the context of exclusion and single mother discourse.

Poor consumers are often defined in relation to marketplace exclusion. For example, Bauman (2005, 38, 112-113) argued that “a normal life is the life of consumers” with the poor described as...
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Coping through consumption is a strategy that extends to almost all the families in the study, and there is emphasis placed on ensuring children have access to the ‘right’ brands to facilitate identity construction. Many strategies focused on minimizing expenditure are strictly followed to ensure budget allocation towards more conspicuous forms of consumption including clothing, footwear, jewellery, home decor and gifts for others. The purchase and display of brand names is viewed as a way of avoiding stigma and could be considered as a disconfirmation of the stereotype (Miller & Major, 2000) aimed at disguising restricted class positions. By attempting to contest and resist the stigmatizing regime, low-income consumers seek consumer normalcy (Baker, 2006) through their marketplace transactions. According to Bourdieu (1984, 56) the ‘refusal of tastes’ plays a key role in consumer choice as people avoid the purchase of goods and services that may be detrimental to their social self-concept. Within the current context, this includes the rejection of low-cost clothing in favour of visible brand names and logos. Evidence suggests that coping efforts may be empowering for lone mothers and can result in higher self-esteem. This interpretation provides an optimistic image of the low-income consumer as an active individual coping victoriously within the challenging context of consumer culture to improve the standard of living for themselves and their family.

However, by interpreting such consumption activity in relation to “a new vocabulary of social class” (Tyler 2008) it becomes apparent that those who follow a strategy of conspicuous consumption in efforts to mask poverty ultimately encounter the very stigmatization that they set out to avoid in the first instance. In recent years, exclusion discourse in the UK has focused on ‘chav’ culture (alongside regional variations in semantics). Often believed to stand for ‘Council Housed and Violent,’ popular media representations and discourse surrounding chav culture is overwhelmingly negative. The stigmatisation of single mothers is particularly prevalent in chav discourse as articulated in Tyler’s (2008) article entitled ‘Chav Mum Chav Scum.’ As Tyler (2008, 26) suggests ‘whilst young unwed working-class mothers have always been a target of social stigma, hatred and anxiety, the fetishisation of the chav mum within popular culture has a contemporary specificity and marks a new outpouring of sexist class disgust.’ The chav single mother is heavily criticised for vulgar consumption choices, in particular dressing her children “with expensive and thus apparently wholly inappropriate designer clothing and jewellery” (Hayward and Yar 2006, 22). In a cruel irony, some of the brand names that low income consumers purchase to escape stigmatization are the same brands that have particular negative user stereotypes associated with them.

Research on stigma is often based on either micro-individual or macro-social analysis. However, as Campbell & Deacon (2006, p. 412) suggested, there are problems with both these approaches because stigma is both a psychological and a social process. By focusing on the stigmatized individual, ‘existing social relations are usually taken as given’ and by focusing on macro-social analysis, one risks overlooking the ‘individual psychological dimensions of stigma.’ The current research contributes by combining both approaches. By highlighting individual lived experiences of poverty and coping with stigma in relation to discourse on chav culture and single mothers, this study has highlighted the paradoxical nature of consumption.

Integrating Resources via Practices within Consumer Networks: Subsistence Consumers Participating in ‘Chama’ Networks in Kenya

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Subsistence consumers are portrayed as being characterized by a scarcity of economic resources, but rich in social ties formed through networks (Viswanathan et al., 2008). Such networks give them opportunities to interact with one another and generate various forms of resources which enable them to enact their life projects and meet their goals (Arnould, Price and Malshie 2006; Sewell, 1992). The kinds of resources generated and employed vary, as do the terms used to categorize them. Bourdieu’s (1986) categorizes resources in terms of capital, including economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. More recent studies using the service dominant logic categorize resources as either operand (tangible resources such as material objects) or operand (intangible resources such as social resources) (Arnould, Price and Malshie 2006). A number of other classifications exist, but despite the different terminologies used, resources constitute accumulative assets that consumers can use to achieve their goals and basically to satisfy their needs (Bristow and Mowen, 1998: 2). Within consumer research there have been calls for researchers to consider the resources that the poor have and not just deficits (Moser 1998). This paper explores how subsistence consumers in Kenya integrate and (re) configure their resources by engaging in consumer collectives (Chama), and concludes that through the practices enacted within such collectives the integration of resources is perpetuated with varying outcomes.

The term ‘Chama’ is used to refer to collectives very similar to the Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), and is the term to be used in this paper to refer to ROSCAs and other similar collectives. The emergence of such groups in Kenya started in the 1970s and 1980s (Johnson, 2004), predominantly organized and run by women. The prevalence of women participants has been attributed to the patrilineal nature of the communities they live in, where inheritance and ownership arrangements are often biased against them (Kimuyu, 1999). This makes it hard to access lump-sum financial resources offered by banks and other lenders who usually require collateral in form of property rights to extend such credit to them (Johnson, 2004). Consequently, many of them form Chama to access informal credit easily in order to meet their consumption goals. Given the view that Chamas are formed primarily for purposes of accessing credit and for saving, Chamas have largely been studied within economic disciplines, where they are depicted as forms of informal financial markets that fill in gaps left by formal financial markets (Siamwalla et al., 1990; Bouman, 1995). However, they also serve non-financial roles as they are avenues in which societal roles are enacted (Johnson, 2004). This implies that other non-financial resources may be activated, accumulated and shared there as well. Furthermore, Chamas also play important consumption-related roles, as they enable participants to pool funds together in order to meet consumption goals (Kimuyu, 1999). In this paper therefore, Chamas are considered as consumer-constituted collectives which enable various forms of resources to be employed and integrated with various outcomes for the participating consumers.

Methodology and Findings

The study employed an ethnographic approach and was carried out in two slums in the capital city of Kenya (Nairobi) over a period
of 5 months. Living in the slum is characterized by what has been conceptualized as “poor living” (Sen 2000) where consumers face a shortage of income, insecurity, limited social amenities, poor infrastructure among others. In order to experience the lived worlds of these consumers, the first author spent a significant amount of time in the slums with the participants as they went on with their daily activities such as shopping and attending Chama meetings. Six different Chamas, each consisting of an average of 15 women were visited on several occasions. The researcher would sit in during their meetings and take notes, and whenever consent was given the proceedings would be audio-recorded and photographs taken. Group interviews were conducted during these meetings, and individual interviews also followed on different dates with at least 3 different people from each of the Chama. Other data collection methods were also employed such as observations, document analysis as well visits to the sites (like markets) that these participants frequented within the slum.

Findings from the study reveal that subsistence consumers do indeed possess various resources which they employ within their contexts. Consistent with other studies focusing on impoverished communities (e.g. Lee, Otsane and Hill 1999), social capital was found to be prevalent within the Chamas, and engendered norms like mutual support, reciprocity and trust. Drawing on these norms, the participants were able to leverage this capital and achieve certain goals such as assisting one another to educate their children or acquiring consumer durables that they would not otherwise afford individually. Chama hence endows them with capabilities that enable them to perform their consumer (as well as other societal) roles.

The findings further reveal that consumers engaged in several practices in Chama, and were consequently able to accrue various forms of resources, as well as convert them to other forms through these practices. In one of the main practices named ‘merry-go-round’ for instance, participants meet in one of their homes primarily to pool financial resources together for various consumption purposes (integration of economic capital). Such meetings are in some instances characterized by feasting, providing participants opportunities for social interaction (accruing social capital) as well as enabling the hosts to demonstrate their hospitality skills, gaining respect through their adroit performances (demonstration of cultural capital and possible accumulation symbolic capital). For these women, the ability to perform this ‘merry-go-round’ practice effectively (e.g. by consistently providing the funds to be pooled, cooking the ‘right’ foods) demonstrates possession of context-specific cultural capital, and women who do not demonstrate this capability may sometimes find themselves excluded from engaging in future Chama activities. So important is it to be part of Chama that some of the participants consider women who do not belong to Chama ‘abnormal’. As such, exclusion from Chama would marginalize them socially, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities they face.

Literature on resource integration has been presented largely within consumer-supplier exchange contexts (e.g. McGrath and Otnes 1995), and even when done outside such contexts, the emphasis has been on financial resources (e.g. Ruth and Hsiung, 2007). This current research makes contributions by focusing on a variety of resources integrated by consumers collectively outside the market exchange interface. It is envisaged that much can be learnt about resource integration outside such contexts especially amongst impoverished consumers whose resource constraints have wider implications beyond those experienced within the consumer-supplier exchange interface. This research also addresses recent calls to focus on the practices involved in integrating resources (e.g. Klein-altenkamp, 2012) and highlights how collective practices act as the catalysts that determine how resources are integrated, accumulated and even lost.

Using Consumption Practices to Countervail Stigma Experiences and Transform Self-Identity among the Homeless

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Becoming homeless is a stressful event that society stigmatizes (Phelan et al. 1997). Homeless individuals experience a threat to their self as a result of not only stress-inducing events such as loss of their economic resources, but also the stigma experience and social disapproval of their social identity (Dovidio et al. 2000). Link and Phelan (2001) reviewed various definitions and conceptualized stigma as a convergence of components that develop with the co-occurrence of social labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination, as well as the existence of an adverse power structure that allows these factors to facilitate stigmatization. In short, “it takes power to stigmatize” (Link and Phelan 2001, p. 375). This implies that the social production of stigma on an individual or group depends on social, economic, political, and cultural power to activate stereotypes, stimulate discrimination, and link them to undesirable characteristics in society.

Beyond the presence of power structures, scholars argue that the effects of stigma on individuals are shaped by the extent to which those individuals internalize the stigma (Veer, 2009, Alonzo and Reynolds, 1995). In particular, Miller and Major (2000, p.247) suggest that stigmatized individuals will not necessarily “suffer from reduced well being if they use coping strategies that are effective at managing the internal or external demands posed by the appraised threat.” Individuals can use coping strategies to protect the threatened individual self, and generate cognitive and behavioral efforts to countervail the stigma threat. In other words, the stigma threat perceived by individuals depends on not only the socio-culturally produced stigma prevalent in society, but also how they manage the stigmatization.

One critical realm for coping with the experience of stigma threat is community. According to Swanson (1985), stigmatized individuals that live in a supportive community can draw vital material and spiritual support from other community members to help them adapt to the social world. Part of this adaption involves challenging the legitimacy of social stigma and re-appropriating cultural meanings that bring harm. An example from a consumer behavior perspective is found in Scaraboto and Fischer (2010), who investigated the “Fat Acceptance Movement” and demonstrated how the action of collectives helps consumers fight stigma and promote social change.

Goffman (1963) posits that stigma is developed through social interaction, and the marketplace is one of the social spaces in which individuals perform and develop their social identities. In recent years, studies have focused on analyzing different groups that suffer from discrimination in the marketplace. Scholars have identified the way individual and collective practices can become instruments that consumers use to not only cope with a stigmatized experience, but also promote a positive self-conception (Adkins and Otsane 2005, Crosby and Otnes 2010, Hamilton and Catterall 2008, Hamilton and Hassan 2008). However, most studies focus on stigma and coping strategies when people are already stigmatized. Few studies have explored how a stigmatized characteristic is developed and its trajectory over time (e.g Sandikci and Ger 2010), or have used a process-oriented approach to analyze individuals’ response strategies while the stigma characteristic is being constructed (see Alonzo
The present study analyzes different consumption-related strategies that homeless individuals, and communities related to them, use to alter the power relationship that influences their stigma experience (Link and Phelan, 2001). To do so, the study draws upon ethnographic methods including observation, immersion experiences, and depth interviews in two contexts: a shelter dedicated to offer different services to the homeless individuals in the UK, and a US organization that seeks to develop community among homeless people through weekly religious services.

In the first context, the inquiries focus on identifying the different types of stigma that UK and US individuals experience and the consumption-related coping strategies they employ along their pathways to homelessness (Clapham, 2003). Findings reflect how individuals experience different types of stigma during their path into homelessness, as well as the different coping strategies they develop and modify during the time they spend on the streets. We find that informants initially fight their stigma, however, they embrace it during periods of chronic homelessness. Interestingly, we find that some individuals learn to use stigma to their own benefit (e.g. hiding or highlighting the stigma-stigmatized label) to obtain money by begging. Participants range from passive victims to active challengers, and individuals found alternatives in their everyday lives to change the power dynamics and resist the experience of stigmatization.

In the second scenario, inquiries are directed to explore the role that collective action and the sense of community with people who do not share the stereotyped characteristic plays in the stigma experience. Findings in this scenario reveal that collective action and the sense of community become the individual’s authoritative performances (Arnould and Price, 2000), in which the community creates and sustains shared collective traditions that enable individuals to gain power and agency to face the difficult situation they are experiencing. The participation of non-stigmatized individuals within the community experience (i.e. religious service) brings a legitimating view from outsiders that re-orient the social sphere and minimizes focus on stereotypes/status (i.e. “I don’t care if you’re homeless or a CEO, in this place all are children of God”).

In conclusion, the study reflects an overlap between manifestations of consumer resistance and coping strategies employed to reduce disadvantages in the marketplace. This phenomenon is consistent with Firat and Venkatesh’s (1995) view that in postmodernity, consumption processes have an emancipatory potential.

Vulnerable consumers: Ethnography of the Consumption of French Farmers Facing Impoverishment

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When Time magazine has a cover title about “France’s Rural Revolution: Traditional French farms are dying”, we can read between the lines and ask ourselves about the farmers whose farms are dying. Who are those farmers? How does this context impact their life, their family life? How are they facing this transition, this “revolution”? A closer look at this specific population of smallholding farmers (a total of 328,000 families) gives striking figures for the year 2011 showing that more than 39,000 impoverished families of farmers are eligible for welfare assistance such as income support and food bank. The paradoxical phenomenon is such that farmers, who are supposed to feed the people, can no longer feed themselves.

The current research consists of an ethnography of the consumption culture of vulnerable and impoverished consumers. The originality of this study lies in the singularity of farmers as a community, and as a professional group, that is facing a multi-level crisis (international, European, national, regional, departmental, professional, familial, individual).

Within the domain of consumer vulnerability, we have identified calls for research to study unique and specific populations to develop the field of consumer vulnerability (Baker, Gentry, Rittenburg, 2005), and to study impoverished vulnerable consumers in rural areas of developed countries (Hill, 2008). Our literature review is three-fold: Marketing and poverty researchers (Townsend 1962, Chaplovitz 1962, Andreasen 1993, Alwitt 1995, Adkins and Ozanne 2005, Hill 2008) have first looked at what poor people consume, before looking at the behavior and culture of consumption of those impoverished consumers. Social scientists see poverty as an issue related to the lack of social links and to the inability to express oneself through consumption goods and rites (Douglas 2007). Transformative Consumer Researchers take the approach that research should shed light on consumer issues, and help to improve consumers’ lives (Mick 2006).

We propose two research questions. First, how can we characterize and describe the notion of consumer vulnerability in the context of the rural and agricultural space? Second, if we consider that one function of consumer goods is to make culture tangible, then how can we characterize poor farmers’ culture of consumption? More specifically, we look at how the experience of vulnerability shapes consumers’ response and adaptation to the consumption context. Mary Douglas (2007) describes the cultural theory of apathy as a long-lasting state that emerges when the freedom to choose is suppressed, when social networks are destroyed, when despair is stronger than hope. We hypothesize that a way out of this dead end occurs when vulnerable consumers engage in a project of creating new social links through consumption practices.

To follow the tradition inherent to the stream of research on poverty and vulnerability issues, we rely on ethnographic methods such as interviews and observation: individual in-depth unstructured and semi-structured follow-up interviews, group interviews, (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994); participant observation and analysis of documents (diaries, blogs, forums). Our unit of analysis is the family, i.e three generations (the farmer, the farmer’s parents, and the farmer’s children). In order to integrate farmers’ children, we use children’s drawing (Chan, 2006) as a support for the interview.

A French association, dedicated to help farmers facing difficulties, helped us get in touch with their members and access our field of research. During the year 2011, fifteen interviews were conducted, resulting in a focus on three families. We met each family in their farm, and we spent full days with them. Thus, we could observe and share several moments of their daily life in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the material and social world in which our informants live.

From the findings, we have established a typology of farmers that allows us to identify their different reactions and adaptation to vulnerability as consumers. For example, farmers who see themselves as “entrepreneurs” initiate networks of barter economy. Those who continuously redirect their production also experience a lack of stability in their daily consumption. Farmers who remain on the fringe of development inevitably adopt a way of life similar to voluntary simplicity. Over-indebted farmers tend to deny their state of impoverishment and refuse to ask for resources allowances or to go to the food bank.

“Before the mad cow disease, our life was a life of constraints, for sure, and it was ok for us. Being a farmer means having a life of constraints. But today, we suffer from new constraints which we haven’t chosen and we drown. We don’t know when this will end.
Every day we wake up for work but we lose more money than what we earn. We have given up some habits. We go back to former practices; we live next to nothing, like our grandparents did.”

Considering poor farmers’ culture of consumption, this quote highlights how families experience vulnerability as a specific period of time which is remembered as a strong event. Then, any single tool or good represents a memory of the family’s former and more elaborate material culture: an old coffee mill, the reuse of old sheets to sew up curtains or dresses, the familial hair scissors to avoid the cost of a hairdresser. Staying in touch with their familial roots help those farmers keep the faith in their future. Their motto is henceforth: “If everyone took care of the little they have, the world would feel better.” This peasant common sense par excellence introduces a sensitizing theoretical framework for how families elaborate a system of values underlying their world of consumption.

The findings of this ethnography have the potential to inform social marketing and social business by elaborating a specific knowledge of one kind of hidden poverty. We portray a typology of consumption processes within a vulnerable population, and enhance knowledge of the role of consumption goods in their strategies of identity survival. We also help social marketing actors better target this population of impoverished farmers when preventing bankruptcy, social isolation or suicide.