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**Adopting or Rejecting Sustainable Consumption
Practices: The Role of Identity Conflicts**

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Adopting or Rejecting Sustainable Consumption Practices: The Role of Identity Conflicts

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Abstract

This research explores self identity and its influence on sustainable consumption. Depth interviews were held with 17 mothers who, with the goal of consuming in a more sustainable fashion, had recently made changes to their consumption practices. The discussions explored these decisions and why specific behaviours were adopted or rejected. The findings show that as a result of society's growing awareness of environmental issues, conflict has been created between two identities; the respondents "mother" identity and the previously rejected identity of "radical conservationist." As a consequence, behaviours and values once part of the rejected identity need to be considered for inclusion as part of the core. An assimilation strategy was used to manage this conflict so that the values and behaviours were accepted, modified or rejected according to whether they could be adopted without changing their notions of themselves as mothers. This conceptualisation is able to explain the adoption of previously radical green practices and why behaviours were rejected, despite positive beliefs being held or similar actions having been embraced.

Introduction

In their excellent recent article, Peattie and Peattie (2009) examine how social marketing may help address critical sustainability issues facing the global economy. They justify this by highlighting how governmental and marketing efforts over the last 20 years have failed to address the environmental issues described in the WECD (Brundtland) report (1987). Indeed, as Peattie and Peattie powerfully put it:

Despite the two Earth Summits at Rio and Johannesburg, the publication of corporate environmental or sustainability strategies becoming commonplace, and the launch of many innovative greener products, environmental and economic data demonstrate that the majority of trends continue to move away from sustainability." (Peattie and Peattie, 2009, p. 260)

This lack of success is partly due to the positive words and intentions expressed by both governments and consumers not being transformed in to action. For example, despite declaring the importance of the fight against climate change, the worlds largest CO₂ emitters (China, USA and India (N.E.E.A, 2008)) have failed to set binding emission targets. This lack of consistency is also reported in the consumer focussed literature (see Mannetti, Pierro and Livi, 2004). Whilst social marketing can be directed both upstream (governments) and downstream (consumers) (Andreasen, 2006), this paper will focus on consumers.

In explaining this disconnect, the diverse sustainability literature (Allen, Davis and Soskin, 1993; Schultz and Oskamp, 1996; Ebreo, Hershey and Vining, 1999) has tended to use rational, information processing type models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen and Madden, 1986) or extensions of it (Conner and Armitage, 1998). One variable that has been used to improve the TPB's predictive accuracy and has been shown to have an independent effect on behavioural intentions, is self identity (Mannetti, Pierro and Livi, 2004). Whilst showing the importance of this variable, this experimental work cannot provide an in-depth exploration of the influence of self on sustainable consumption. A qualitative

investigation is therefore suggested and is supported by consumer research that shows the complexity and strength of the link between self concept and consumption activities (Belk, 1988). The aim of this research is therefore to explore self identity and the adoption and rejection of sustainable consumption practices. It looks to make a contribution by adding to understanding on why progress toward a sustainable economy has been slower than expected. In addition, it hopes to provide guidance for social marketers and governments on how to more effectively target consumers with sustainable consumption messages.

To achieve this, mothers who had recently incorporated sustainable consumption practices into their lives, were studied. This group typically have multiple roles and identities, such as mother, wife, homemaker, employee, and friend. By studying this group and probing on reasons for adopting or rejecting alternative green products and brands, insight were gained into how self and identity influences these behaviours. After the data was analysed, it was 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). In a similar fashion to the work of Moisander and Pesonen (2002) and Sayre (1994), prior to presenting the findings, the framework used to explain them will be presented.

Self, Identity Conflicts and Conflict Management

The view of Self used here is one where multiple identities are used to construct a relatively stable, coherent, self concept (Ahuvia, 2005; Tian and Belk, 2005). Ahuvia (2005) acknowledges that since Belk (1988), one of the major developments in consumer research on identity, has been the conceptualisation of self as a narrative which allows us to connect to our pasts, present and potential futures. Identities and the overall conceptualisation of Self are therefore under constant negotiation in our social world, where shared meanings and public standards play a central role in the definition (and changing definitions) of identities such as woman, mother or environmental activist (Schechtman, 1996).

Work by Taylor (1992) and others (see for example Brison, 1997) highlights that this narrative is developed in part by the dialogical character of human life. That is, we learn how to understand ourselves and others via discussion with others and society. Thus, identity is in part, dialogical and as such the changing societal dialogue/narrative can shift the boundaries of what a specific group identity is understood to be (such as mother or radical conservationist).

Therefore, shifting societal expectations and norms create challenges for maintaining a coherent self (Murray, 2002), particularly where these shifts bring rejected or avoided identities into alignment with existing core identities. This in turn ask questions as to how identities are negotiated with respect to ones own narrative and of particular interest to this study, what strategies are used to maintain self when people are confronted by conflict between their core and the other identities (i.e. woman, mother vs. environmentalist, political activist)?

In their 1998 article, Mick and Fournier discuss technological paradoxes and the strategies people employ to cope with them. This discussion is of interest here as the narrative-discursive nature of identity means that people can expect to be confronted by competing or paradoxical narratives. For example, one may simultaneously desire to be, as some informants put it, a “tree hugger”- (one appreciates the values espoused by tree huggers) and desire not to be a “tree hugger” (one does not like the negative social image associated with it). Thus, Mick and Fournier’s strategic behaviours for coping with these paradoxes may be employed when understanding identity negotiation.

Furthermore, Ahuvia's (2005) research is of interest here as it focuses directly on the notion of identity conflicts and suggests that three strategies used to manage them (Demarcating, Compromising and Synthesizing). This taxonomy can be used to categorise not only the work by Mick and Fournier (1998) but also Swann (1987) and Murray (2002). Where a demarcating strategy is used, the individual endorse identity A and identity B is rejected. A compromising strategy "assumes the conflict between A and B is a zero sum game and tries to create an identity partway between identities" (Ahuvia, 2005, p. 181). Finally, synthesis either involves the consumer assuming most of the advantages of identity A and identity B, or the construction of a new identity.

Method

Taking a phenomenological perspective, individual depth interviews were conducted with 17 mothers, aged 28 to 48, from Sydney and Toronto. These women (with household income above \$60,000 AUD) had, within the previous 3 years, made a conscious effort to change their consumption practices to reflect their growing environmental awareness. They were recruited in two ways; the Sydney group were contacted from a database of people who had attended a series of "greenhome" workshops run local councils and the Australian Conservation Foundation. The Toronto mothers were recruited by a professional fieldwork agency working to a strict respondent screener to ensure they conformed to the required socioeconomic profile and practiced sustainable consumption. The findings showed that whilst the individual sustainable practices performed by the two groups differed (mainly due to product availability and local council facilities), they did not differ in the types of identity conflicts suffered or the strategies used to manage these. The interviews followed the design discussed by Thompson et al. (1989) and were conducted in the informants homes, lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours, and were directed by a discussion guide. The discussions were audio taped, from which verbatim transcripts were prepared. The data was analysed using the coding procedures and constant comparative method provided by Glaser (1978).

Findings

The mothers demonstrated a high level of knowledge and commitment to performing a wide range of sustainable behaviours. 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. In both cities, air pollution was the most frequently mentioned concern, though in Sydney, water shortages were also mentioned frequently. 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). "*Well because the Earth is in need of it I guess, and you know, worrying about your kids futures and what's it going to look like for them and the whole global warming thing*" (Rachael, 36, Toronto). 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 purchased accordingly. It was clear that the informants want to exist within the current consumerist society but also want it reformed. As described earlier, informants had recently made significant changes to their consumption practices. It was issues surrounding motherhood such as pregnancy, birth of a baby or pressure from their children that motivated these changes.

Identity Conflict and Management

Each informant discussed how within their daily lives they performed several different roles; such as mother, wife, sister, artist, teacher, and lawyer, which contributed to a range of different identities within their overall self concept. It is conflict between the behaviours and values inherent within different identities and the subsequent management of this conflict that, it is argued here, can help explain what is adopted or rejected. This is despite the informant performing similar actions or expressing opposite beliefs about the specific behaviours. The remainder of the findings section will focus on exploring the conflicts and how they are managed.

The most significant conflict described by the informants was not between themselves as a mother and various other, less central identities (though these occurred). It was between themselves as Mothers and what they described as an avoided identity which they labelled “radical conservationist.” or “treehugger”. This clash is of importance because these two previously incompatible identities (from the respondent’s perspective) have moved closer in terms of the values and behaviours inherent in them. This narrowing has been caused by a greater awareness of environmental issues becoming part of main stream consumerism and the understanding that to protect and care for their children, protecting the environment is not now seen as an option, but rather, a necessity. Therefore, to remain what society is thought to see as being a good mother, the informants have had to adopt what were in the past quite radical sustainable consumption practices such as eating organic food, using environmentally friendly cleaning agents and recycling the vast majority of their household waste. Critically however, they reject the notion of becoming a radical conservationist. *“Would you call yourself a conservationist? S: “I think like people on the outside who aren’t into conservation stuff probably would, but me from being, looking within and looking at the extreme conservationist people, then I wouldn’t.”* (Sarah 40, Sydney)

Rather than finding that Ahuvia’s (2005) “Demarcating,” “Compromising” and “Synthesizing” strategies were used to manage this conflict between mother and environmentalist, a new conceptualisation; the “Assimilation” strategy is proposed that better explains the data. An *assimilation* strategy involves rejecting, accepting or modifying values and behaviours from the “other” identity so that only those that can be accepted into the core identity (and are required to be due to their converging social meaning) *without* changing it, are adopted. It is this final property which separates the assimilating strategy from Ahuvia’s synthesizing approach, as no sense of the identities merging was found, rather one assimilated the required values and behaviours of the other. This allows for radical behaviours to be adopted within personally and socially acceptable boundaries. The respondents spoke clearly that despite making considerable changes to what they did, they had not become radical conservationists nor had their identity as a mother changed. This is 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 (1998) technical paradoxes. Examples of Accepted, Modified and Rejected behaviours are now given.

Reject: Across the sample, each informant gave examples where they had set limits on what would be adopted. In some instances these lead to somewhat surprising inconsistencies. For reasons other than cost and convenience, limitations were typically placed on sustainable practices that either challenged core mothering values or modified the home or body (core elements of self, Belk, 1988). These behaviours were rejected because to accept them, would involve changing their core identity. Examples seen of this include: 1) Francis (43, Toronto)

rejects using environmentally household cleaners whilst eating organic food, growing her own vegetables and using public transport, because these cleaners challenge her conceptualisation of mother as homemaker, where cleanliness is critical. 2) Trish (45, Sydney) rejected getting solar panels because they would change the look her home. 3) Regina (48, Sydney) limits the type of vegetarian meals provided, as it infringes her ability to care for her family *“I did try and put on more vegetarian meals, um, and I have daughter who’s anaemic so it wasn’t sensible to be you know, giving her, and, eggs are not good for my husband who has a cholesterol.”* 4) Rachael (36, Toronto) isn’t prepared to stop skiing as she sees it as part of family bonding and a healthy lifestyle, despite: *“you know, we have to drive two hours to a hill and running the ski lifts and stuff can’t be that good for the environment. And logging the hills and stuff like that. But we’re not giving that up.”* 5) Susan (43, Toronto) won’t take part in political protests as it contradicts beliefs about setting a good example and trusting authority

Accept: Amongst the broad range of sustainable consumption practices discussed, many adopted behaviours can be viewed as previously (in the last 30 years) as quite radical and marginalised (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002). An example of this is how Dee (43, Sydney), as part of being a good mother and caring for her daughter, now provides organic fruit and vegetables. *“Well sometimes they have their organic carrots or tomatoes and sometimes they (the store) just don’t have any.. but I need them because my daughter’s like.. she’s only allowed healthy snacks at school.”* Here, changes in how society views the use of pesticides and fungicides on food have led to organic produce being seen as not only a socially acceptable but even required. Other examples of previously radical behaviours now practiced include: 1) Eating of organic and locally grown fruit and vegetables 2) Purchase and micro production of renewable energy. 3) Purchasing environmentally friendly household cleaning products. 4) Mixing ones own household cleaners (using vinegar and water) and pesticides. 5) Saving water in Toronto where there is no shortage. 6) Creative reuse of possessions, 7) Recycling of used nappies and tissues. Recycling was popular with all informants though what could be achieved was limited by the services provided by local and state government. In Toronto, where it is possible to recycle a great deal of household waste including used tissues and used nappies, these practices were performed enthusiastically. In both cities, there was no apparent limit to what the informants were prepared to sort and recycle. Indeed, failure to do so was condemned by neighbours (who can see curb side recycling bins) and social pressure to improve.

Modify: In some instance the behaviours or values under scrutiny required some modification before it was assimilated into the core identity. Without this modification the behaviour would impinge too greatly on the core identity and would be rejected. For example, rather than stop idling her car to warm in up during the winter, Francis now only does it for two minutes as she feels this is a balance between damaging the environment and providing a warm environment for her and her sons. In another example, Rachael, who because of concerns over the health of her husband and children, modified ideas on what constitutes a healthy diet (no processed foods and high organic content) by adding the occasional McDonalds take-away to ensure that they receive enough fat.

Discussion

A key part of the aim of this paper was to explore the role of identity on sustainable consumption. Building on work by Ahuvia (2005) and others, this research highlights how conflicts between core and other identities, created by changing standards and values, can be negotiated so that despite (and because of) the adoption of new values and consumption practices, self image can be maintained. This form of identity management is named an assimilation strategy. It shows how core parts of our identity can assimilate or reject values and

behaviours associated with previously avoided identities and in the face of considerable change, we can avoid changing.

This research has several recommendations for social marketers, charities and governments wishing to influence the development of a sustainable economy. It suggests that success in adopting environmentally sustainable lifestyles may be linked to success in incorporating changes into existing identities rather than requiring the consumer to change the way they see themselves. Rather than attempting to “turn people green” or trying to get them to adopt behaviours they associate with conservationists or other avoided identities, attempts may be more successful if the behaviours and values are framed as being a necessary part of existing core identities such as mother, father, wife or husband. Linked with this idea is the finding that for the informants here, the changes they have made and are prepared to make, sit firmly within the dominant consumer economy discourse. The informants support change rather than revolution, again this frame should be considered by social marketers. Overall, these recommendations provide an alternative to information or fear based campaigns. Beyond using social marketing, the informants often mentioned the need for governments to provide structural support for the individual actions. This requirement for government action to facilitate individual’s action supports the work Newman (2007).

Finally, there are limitations that restrict the strength of the recommendations. The theory development described here should be densified with a wider range of informants and the specific causal relationships suggested between identity and behaviour should be tested.

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