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THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT -

The use of a cultural perspective to interpret behavior and direct investigation in consumer research has been sporadic, despite its profound potential. "Culture" has imprecise and unwieldy connotations which make traditional consumer researchers hesitant to employ it as an interpretative frame. This paper proposes a conception of culture designed to assist researchers in understanding consumer behavior. Some suggestions for using a cultural perspective are provided.

In his review of the benchmark study of culture conducted by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) - the one cited so often in despair or derision by contemporary consumer researchers - which provided us with 164 definitions and almost 300 conceptions of the term "culture," the late cultural theorist Leslie White (1954) celebrated its thorough detail but lamented the confusion such a study would engender. In our quantitative investigations of consumer behavior, culture frequently represents "the unexplained residuum of rigorous empirical analysis, an area of darkness beyond the reach of currently available scientific searchlights" (LeVine 1984). That many researchers operate in a "world of variables with frequencies of less than 70%, and arbitrarily assign certain characteristics to the J-curve has profound implications for our understanding of consumer behavior: mere "background parameters" from one perspective become topics of "revealing cultural inquiry" from another (LeVine 1984). In the spirit of Tucker's (1966) call for help in the search for "useful questions," this essay discusses the cultural perspective in consumer research.

Defining Culture

To understand the complexity of the term "culture" in modern usage, beyond the literal continuity of physical process (as in sugar-beet culture or germ culture) Williams (1983) wisely insists that we recognize three broad categories of active usage. The first is the independent abstract noun describing a general process of intellectual, spiritual and physical development, which has its origins in the 18th century. The second is the independent noun indicating a particular way of life, which has its origins in the late 19th century. The third is an applied form of the first sense, an independent abstract noun describing the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity, which has its origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Each usage is currently colored by every other. While usage number three is perhaps the most widespread, I will use the second sense as the foundation of this essay.

Perhaps the oldest "terminological wrangle" in anthropology centers around the term "culture" (D'Andrade 1984). It has been treated both as a class of "things," often with a very particular content, and as a process. Of all the classificatory schemata used by anthropologists to describe and analyze cultural systems, a "universal patterns proposed by Harris (1971) has proven effective for researchers of varying theoretical bent. This universal pattern of culture has three major functional sectors: ecology, social structure, and ideology. Ecology is the way a system is adapted to its habitat. This adaptation is shaped by the technology used to obtain, transform, and distribute resources. Demographic factors also govern the relationship between cultural system and environment. This component of the universal pattern is the infrastructure. Social structure is the way that an orderly social life is maintained. Domestic and political groupings are fundamental social structural units, the order within and between which permits economic transaction. Neither the production, consumption, or exchange of resources, nor the structure of social groups performing these functions can be satisfactorily understood in isolation. This component of the universal pattern is the structure. Ideology is the set of mental characteristics that fit a people to its ecology and social structure; it encompasses all socially patterned thought. Ideology as Harris (1971) understands it can be explicated using a set of concepts discussed by Geertz (1973): world view and ethos. World view is the cognitive, existential aspect of culture, embodying the most comprehensive ideas of order. Ethos is the moral, aesthetic, evaluative aspect of culture, embodying a people's mood or character. Together, world view and ethos impart meaning to experience. This component of the universal pattern is the superstructure. A functional unity between these sectors of culture has been a basic postulate of many culture theorists (Harris 1971). The universal pattern can be used effectively to understand consumer behavior as a cultural system.

World system theorists (Rollwagen 1980) have criticized traditional anthropological treatments of culture as isolationist insofar as the adaptive interaction among cultures has been ignored. Recent work by Wolf (1982) has provided a much needed corrective, and has recast culture as a series of processes that construct, reconstruct and dismantle cultural materials, in response to identifiable determinants. Thus, it is inaccurate to speak of the instrumental forms and the ideological codes which constitute "culture" as existing in vacuo. Culture is not so much a property of society as it is a process of creation and interpretation that occurs when people interact over time (Rollwagen 1980). Hintz's (1985) masterful interpretation of the role of sugar in modern history is a striking example of the culture-as-processing viewpoint.

Culture can be viewed in Williams (1977) scheme as an interrelated configuration of archaic, residual and emergent dimensions. At the level of archaic culture, past patterns are generally no longer effective in the present, although they may serve as sources of historical identity. Residual culture is comprised of lived patterns originating in the past, but affecting interactions in the present. Emergent culture consists of existing expectations, values and interactions, along with the process through which new meanings and relationships are continually created. Thus, culture is not uniform, in the sense that it is a continual synthesis of old and new. Given the many modes of exchange between societies, every culture can be understood as an amalgam (Ulin 1984).

The properties of culture that LeVine (1984) experiences as central are collectivity, organization, multiplexity and variability. Culture is collective in that, within a to unity, consensus exists about meaning, consensus is related substantively to the importance of social communication, and that

consensus produces redundancy across individuals. Culture is organized in that a coherence or connectedness, regardless of degree and of kind, exists between its elements; it is not a random assemblage of discrete elements. Culture is multiplex in that it cannot be reduced to its explicit or implicit dimensions, and that it can integrate rational and nonrational elements into a workable rationale. Culture is variable in that the patterns by which people live their lives vary widely by place and time. We will discuss variability in considerable detail directly.

D'Andrade (1984) has identified three major views about the nature of culture, which can be arrayed along a continuum. At one pole, culture is conceived of as knowledge, or accumulated information, which is not necessarily widely shared nor necessarily highly integrated. The volume of information in the cultural knowledge pool is extremely large. At the other pole, culture consists of "conceptual structures" that create the "central reality" of a people, and which are intersubjectively shared. The entire system is highly interrelated, despite any contradictions which might exist. The volume of information in the cultural knowledge pool is relatively small. Between these polar conceptions of the nature of culture lies the third, or institutional, conception which views culture as clusters of norms defining the roles which attach to statuses; integration, while important, is problematic. The amount of information in the cultural knowledge pool is considerable.

It is often remarked that nothing so divides researchers seeking to generalize about human behavior as the issue of cultural variability (LeVine 1984). How do we interpret the facts of cultural variation in generalizing about variability? LeVine (1984) identifies three perspectives commonly assumed on this issue. Again, the idea of a continuum is useful. At one pole, the reductionists (Marxists, neoclassical economists, cultural materialists, orthodox Freudians, sociobiologists, etc.) promote such basic premises as uniformities of structure and content in human life, culture and motivation across time and place. They minimize variability and dismiss variation as surface manifestations concealing deeper uniformities. At the other pole, phenomenologists insist on the uniqueness of each culture, the local pattern of meaning with which apparent universals are invested, and the impossibility of constructing useful cross-cultural categories. They view similarities in behavior as superficial, and feel comparative methods will obscure the diversity of meanings that defines a particular culture. Between these poles is the centrist position, which posits no a priori theoretical position forecasting the results of inquiries into variation and demands a larger, more appropriate theoretical frame than those currently available. It is this centrist position that LeVine (1984) champions in his advocacy of ethnographic and comparative methods.

While we have abandoned the anarchic "shreds and patches" concept of culture once popular, in favor of conceptions based upon pattern, we have not moved significantly beyond the search for an appropriate metaphor in attempting to define culture. For our present purposes, I will inelegantly proclaim that culture at once is constituted and constituting. It is composed of, and in turn, composes two significant human phenomena: meaning systems and material flows (D'Andrade 1984). Meanings represent the world, create cultural entities, direct people to behave in particular ways, and evoke particular feelings. Material flow denotes the movement of potentially countable entities - goods, services, messages, genes, etc - in space and time. Human groups adapt to their environment and structure interpersonal activity through these two phenomena. Meaning systems and material flows are mutually influential and differentially distributed across persons (D'Andrade 1984).

The challenge to consumer researchers - the majority of whom are firmly embedded in and actively constructing a culture of consumption - is to describe and interpret both the meaning systems and material flows underlying consumer behavior, as well as to analyze the relationship between meaning and flow. That worlds of goods exist within which culture is created and cognition structured is recognized; how these processes unfold across cultures remains to be determined (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, Agnew 1983). Cultural analysis can improve our understanding of consumer behavior as trivial as the new Coke debacle and as profound as the Third World infant formula complex. The fruits of such analysis might then be used to maintain or transform consumer culture.

A Prescription for Consumer Research

Because this essay was drafted to amplify the voice of a disaffected and growing minority of researchers interested in moving beyond the traditional positivist, cognitive psychological orientations in consumer behavior studies, some programmatic remarks are required. We are living in an era in which cultural diversity is alternately accelerated and eroded by the diffusion of consumer ideology. The fragmentation of the domestic marketplace, the allure of a global marketplace, the spectra of protectionism, the renaissance of organizational climate concerns, the critique of development, the new international division of labor and dozens of other critical trends virtually compel us to adapt a cultural perspective in our research. Whether "subculture," "ethnicity" or "segment" becomes our interpretive frame, whether "corporation," "household" or "family" becomes our laboratory, or whether "normative," "idiographic," or "eclectic" becomes our orientation are all subsidiary to our decision to focus on meaning systems and material flows within and between groups.

Without undertaking a critique of naive empiricism, or proclaiming the primacy of the centrist perspective enterprises we may be unwilling or unable to support what steps can a consumer researcher take in adapting a cultural perspective? The first is to negotiate a working conception of culture, in terms of your preferences regarding variability and nature as discussed above. The investigator who views culture as a nonrational, extralogical, arbitrary partitioning of the world that is "framed," talked about, acted upon, even labelled and is handed over from one generation to the next" (Shweder 1984) will generate questions and findings that a consumer researcher with an opposing perspective can employ, advancing the field in the bargain. The second is to select a consumer research issue, and frame it in terms of meaning systems and material flows. Gauging the impact of differential time allocations upon the household meal complex lends itself to such a framing: "role," "family," "time," "food," and "meal" are just a few of the culturally constructed entities that must be interpreted. The third is to identify an accessible group that would become your fieldsite, or natural laboratory. Urban nomads, middle managers, rural black families, flea market dealers, yuppie neighbors and other "naturally" occurring groups in their traditional contexts are exemplary units. The fourth step - and one best left to another paper, is the selection of an appropriate methodology. The tailoring of research design to problem and setting is a challenging and ongoing enterprise. Cultural perspectives have been guided by ethnographic and ethnologic procedures, traditionally. (The merits and shortcomings of ethnography in consumer research will be discussed at our next Annual Conference, if the proposed Consumer Behavior Odyssey Project is successfully launched.) It is important to note that many theorists' conceptions of culture have emerged as a direct result of their ethnographic work.

CONCLUSION

A cultural perspective assists the researcher in achieving a comprehensive understanding of the consumer behavior he or she is attempting to interpret. That interpretation is a synthesis of the consumer's native intuition and the analyst's understanding. Recent forays into cultural hermeneutics, semiotics, discourse analysis, structural anthropology, historical materialism and other "nontraditional" disciplines have rewarded consumer researchers with novel insights into their subjects.

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