

Observations On Marketing And Consumption: An Anthropological Note

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ABSTRACT

Recently marketing scholars and consumer researchers have been apprised of the peril of ignoring the metatheoretical implications of relying excessively on a single paradigm in their research. The models and metaphors by which we apprehend marketplace phenomena, and the methods by which we generate and test these constructs are the less elegant for this dependency. An anthropological approach is one means of rectifying this situation. One of the critical issues to be resolved if marketers, consumer researchers and anthropologists are to work effectively together is that of strategic vision. Toward this end, this paper examines the types of marketplace behavior of interest to anthropologists, and illustrates ways in which the perspective of anthropology can be applied to issues in contemporary marketing and consumer behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Familiarity with the work of economic anthropologists could greatly assist marketers and consumer researchers in understanding marketing related behaviors in all types of societies, and facilitate practical, humane, culturally appropriate intervention in each type of society by local or foreign, private or governmental entrepreneurs and "developers." Conversely, familiarity with the work of marketers and consumer researchers could greatly assist anthropologists in understanding and interpreting the range of economic behavior in complex society. Unfortunately, lack of familiarity has bred a mutual indifference, if not contempt, among the researchers of these parallel disciplines. This essay attempts to bridge the gap between these disciplines by exploring the perspectives adopted by economic anthropologists in their study of market phenomena, by documenting the recent interest in consumer behavior on the part of some anthropologists, and by detailing the ideological conflicts that currently inhibit the interdisciplinary study of marketing and consumer behavior. In merging sociological critique with bibliographic exposition, the author seeks to address Deshpande's (1983) concern with metatheoretical bias in research.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND MARKETPLACE BEHAVIOR

Generally speaking, anthropologists interested in behaviors related to economies have conducted investigations in three kinds of societies: non-market, market and transitional. This is a typological (neither developmental nor evolutionary) distinction useful to understanding phenomena which concern contemporary social scientists, and is devoid of the implicit ethnocentrism of such terms as "modern" or "less developed."

Non-market societies (e.g., hunters and gatherers, pastoralists, horticulturists, agriculturalists, etc.) are nonindustrial cultures whose institutions are

embedded in kinship relations, whose economic exchanges are based on reciprocity, whose modes of production are owned individually or by kin group and geared toward subsistence. Should marketplaces exist, they are expedient sites for exchange, rather than dominant institutions necessary to existence. Transitional societies (e.g., peasants, fishers, itinerant craftsmen, Fourth World peoples, etc.) represent a mix--actually a number of mixes--of nonindustrial and industrial cultures, and thus combine both market and nonmarket features. The spread of cash crops and wage labor draw these societies into local, regional and world markets, producing a dislocation and reordering of traditional attitudes, beliefs and behaviors (Dholakia and Sherry 1987). Economic exchanges are increasingly based on market factors and geared toward producing profit. Ownership of the means of production is often relinquished by individuals. Market societies (e.g., capitalist, socialist and mixed capitalist/socialist economies) are the industrial cultures most familiar to contemporary marketing practitioners and consumer researchers. Nonmarket enclaves often exist within market societies (Applebaum 1984a; 1984b).

Studies in each of these societies have the potential of advancing knowledge in the disciplines of marketing and consumer research. Non-market societies can be investigated for the light to be shed on activities such as gift giving and relationship management. Such societies have also been proposed as exemplars of adaptation in the evolution of trans-market civilizations (Dholakia and Sherry 1987). Corporate group dynamics and other fundamental organization behaviors are conveniently studied in nonmarket societies. Transitional society studies are critical to our understanding of articulation and linkage issues, as economies of numerous kinds and scales combine to create a world system or systems (Choate and Linger 1988). Such societies are key players in the practice of international marketing. Developments related to the new international division of labor are effectively monitored here as well. Finally, the market societies which have provided the bulk of data upon which the disciplines of consumer behavior and marketing have been forged, have yet to be explored systematically for generalizable principles and cross-culturally valid constructs. The standardization-adaptation debate must move to an empirical level if it is not to stagnate entirely.

Marketplace exchange most typically studied by anthropologists can be characterized by several interdependent processual dimensions and institutional forms. At the level of process, analyses have been locational, interactional and allocational. Locational analysis tracks the spatial flow of goods from production to exchange, or from sale to consumption. Interactional analysis has probed the social relations of transactors, with special attention to features such as bargaining dynamics, trading partnerships and

ceremonial gift giving. Allocational analysis describes the outcome of transactions in quantitative economic values. The institutional forms of marketplace exchange are termed sectional and network. Sectional organization obtains when production and exchange are circumscribed by factors that severely constrain the alternatives of an individual actor; a mutual interdependence of economic units, or sections, thereby arises. With network organization, a much more flexible relationship between individual economic agents obtains. These institutional forms, while distinct, are often coexistent (Cook 1973).

These types of marketplace exchanges are quite familiar to marketers and consumer researchers. What is of particular use in these anthropological accounts is detail and texture. Such accounts typically contain rich, historically particular descriptions of marketing behaviors. Geographic dispersion is another benefit; most culture areas have been investigated, at least in exploratory fashion, and some in exhaustive, long term fashion, by economic anthropologists. Finally, these accounts contain the building blocks upon which comparative generalizations may be built, against which in turn our universal theories and models of marketing and consumption may be tested.

Anthropologists have adopted several stances toward the study of economic activity characteristic of marketing. The formalist school maintains that the principles of formal neoclassical economics apply to all economies, including those of nonwestern, nonindustrial societies (Cole 1982). The formalists are synchronic and analytic in perspective, logico-deductive in method and concerned primarily with systematically analyzing the dynamics and conditions of social performance across cultures. Formalists view "the economy" as rational decision making wherever it occurs in a social system (Cook 1973). Work by Belshaw (1968), Cook (1970), Nash (1961) and Schneider (1974) is representative of this school. The formalist stance is the most recognizable posture adopted in contemporary marketing and consumer research. Its interpretive primacy is virtually uncontested, as it appears grounded in the "natural" or "common-sensical" foundation of positivist inquiry.

The substantivist school requires that the content of behavior be analyzed to determine whether or not it is economically rational. Substantivists, following Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson (1957), distinguish three kinds of exchange behavior: market, reciprocity and redistribution (Cole 1982). The substantivists are historical and relativistic in perspective, and employ taxonomic and typological method. They are concerned primarily with the structure and function of contrasting institutional or organizational types. Substantivists deny the existence of a discrete economic sphere, preferring to discuss economizing behavior as it articulates with an institutional matrix (Cook 1973). The work of Bohannon (1963, 1965), Dalton (1961) and Sahlin (1972) is representative of this school. With the broadening of conceptions of marketing and consumer behavior that has occurred in the last decade, the substantivist approach appears to have much to offer

theorists (for example, Hudson and Ozanne 1988) challenging received wisdom and conventional research methods.

The Marxist school maintains that economic behavior is rational, but that maximization of utility is not a universal motivation for behavior. Maximization is seen as a rationalization of capitalist economic relationships. The Marxists are concerned primarily with class relationships (Cole 1982). They require that a comparative view of rationality be developed, and view economic anthropology as an extension of political economy (Cook 1973). The problematic advanced by French neo-Marxist economic anthropologists which rejects both formalism and substantivism in favor of exploring the penetration of so-called traditional modes of production by capitalism--the emphasis is placed on social formations resulting from the articulation of these modes such that the former become structured components of the latter--is especially noteworthy (Prattis 1987). The work of Godelier (1977) and Meillassoux (1975) is representative of this school. Recent work on marketing and development (Dholakia and Firat 1988), critical theoretical examinations of consumer behavior (Rogers 1987), and macro analyses of advertising (Jhally 1987) draws on a common body of Marxist and neo-Marxist scholarship.

Each of these schools is concerned with the impact of Western economic systems on societies around the world (Cole 1982), and none has developed precise criteria for delimiting the economic field of study as distinct from any other field within a social system (Cook 1973). Researchers exploring the social impact of the expansion of the World capitalist system (Nash 1981; Price 1984; Wallerstein 1974), often under the rubric of development, have employed the perspectives of each of these schools to insightful effect. Critics of all of these schools (notably Gudeman 1986) who regard the approaches as ineluctably, axiomatically Western, and who seek some middle ground between derivation and nihilism, have advocated the cross-cultural study of local metaphors of livelihood as a corrective. Still, of the dimensions of economic behavior considered most essential to the phenomenon of marketing--production, distribution, exchange and utilization--it is this last, utilization, or consumption as we more commonly speak of (and misinterpret) it, that has been most ignored by economic anthropologists. Even the most thorough of contemporary ethnographic analyses of marketplace behavior (e.g., Alexander 1987) routinely slight consumer behavior in overall treatment. This imbalance has become the focus of recent attention of anthropologists seeking to forge links with consumer researchers (Arnould and Wilk 1984; Douglas 1976, 1983; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Sherry 1983, 1984).

ANTHROPOLOGY AND CONSUMER RESEARCH

The call for an anthropology of consumption was formally issued by Douglas (1976), who forcefully argued that a systematic account of consumers' objectives had not yet been rendered, and that any

proposed account should be consistent with a communications theory of the use of goods. Such semiotic advocacy is gradually diffusing into marketing and consumer research (Umiker-Sebeok 1987). The propositions underlying her proposed theory of consumption are fourfold. First, consumption activity is seen as a "ritual presentation and sharing of goods classified as appropriate to particular social categories which themselves get defined and graded in the process." Secondly, the main objective of a consumer's behavior is to "help create the social universe and to find in it a creditable place." Thirdly, to achieve this objective, the consumer must mobilize "marking services"--personal attendance at consumption events or material contributions of goods geared toward reinforcing agreed upon canons of judgment--from other consumers. Finally, successful consumption requires a "deployment of goods in consumption rituals that will mobilize the maximum marking services from other consumers." Of the functions fulfilled by goods--subsistence, competitive display, and the making stable and visible the categories of culture--the social meanings created and carried by goods are most significant. Goods create intelligibility (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). Believing that consumption is ultimately about power, Douglas and Isherwood (1979) view the individual overriding objective of a consumer as being the acquisition and control of information about the changing cultural scene, to assure inclusion in "shared civilities." This macro species of information processing indicates the mutually constituting nature of mentalistic and materialistic dimensions of culture. Goods have the capacity to increase personal availability, that is, to reduce periodicity constraints on the individual, making asynchronous work a viable endeavor (Douglas 1983).

As a preliminary call for research, the formulations of Douglas and her colleagues must be considered tentative and incomplete, although clearly important. The focus on the exchange of information to the exclusion or slighting of other dimensions of consumption provides other researchers with a point of departure for additional investigation, and a contextual framework in which to embed their own studies. For example, anthropologists such as Arnould (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), McCracken (1986, 1988) and Sherry (1986) have used a cultural perspective to explore structural and processual dimensions of consumption phenomena. Appadurai (1986) and his colleagues have launched an inquiry into the "social life" of consumption objects that has profound implications for research in marketing and consumer research. That anthropologists have been remiss in studying the changes over the last half-century in the trade of consumer products in developing nations, favoring instead the investigation of marketplaces, petty entrepreneurship and commercial networks of peasant produce, is made clear in Dannhaeuser's (1983) study of modern channel institutions and their dynamics in the Philippines. His ethnography demonstrates nicely the compatibility of anthropological and marketing perspectives, mediating as it does between a

"proclivity for [local] detail" and a "prejudice for the aggregate." This approach would translate with minor modifications to an urban American setting as well.

Efforts ranging from tentative and oblique through assertive are underway within the field of anthropology to correct the deficiency noted by Dannhaeuser. The participants in recent annual meetings of the Society for Economic Anthropology addressed the topics of "Markets and Marketing," "Entrepreneurship and Social Change," and "Problems and Issues in the Study of Consumption" in nonmarket, market and transitional social settings. Similar topics have been raised in sessions on Business Anthropology and on Industrial Ethnography at recent annual meetings of the American Anthropological Society. Finally, the Society for Applied Anthropology has included papers on marketing and contemporary society in several of its last annual meetings. With the formal institutionalizing of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology within the American Anthropological Association in 1984, the possibility of conducting joint marketing and consumer behavior studies and other collaborative research may finally be broached. Prospects of cooperation between Local Practitioner Organizations of consulting anthropologists, and regional affiliates of the American Marketing Association may thereby be enhanced. Despite these advances, however, some serious obstacles to interdisciplinary investigation remain.

STRATEGIC VISION IN MARKETING AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The view of marketing as a technology of influence (Anderson 1983)--the "channel captain" orientation that Tucker (1974) finds within the discipline, and the "engineer of consent" orientation commonly found among critics outside the discipline--is a stumbling block to interdisciplinary cooperation. Social science techniques in service of market research stand accused of promoting alienation and dependence among contemporary consumers in a fashion similar to the *mafias* among Sicilian peasants (Galt and Smith 1976). The former address of Planmetrics, Inc., a corporation employing anthropologists to conduct "Cultural Analysis" for its clients,--666 Madison Avenue--would certainly be viewed as prophetic in the hermeneutics of doctrinal anthropology. The same professionals who might cringe publicly at the pop managerial notion of "constructional linguistics," which seems to smack of the shill of promotional patois, might privately acknowledge the ingenuity of attempts by such firms as NAMELAB to create world names for branded products by combining Indo-European morphemes into combinations like "Sentra" or "Compaq." Anthropologists with qualms about becoming professional market researchers themselves have been advised to defend their domestic and exotic constituencies by instructing them in the guerilla tactics of global capitalism (Steffle 1978).

Similarly, the tardiness of academic anthropology in reconciling its central values of relativity and holism with the partisanship required of

accepting nonacademic clients (Hinshaw 1980), and in restructuring its world view sufficiently to admit contemporary industrial or post-industrial business activity as a legitimate field of inquiry (Sherry 1983) has retarded interdisciplinary cooperation. The view of anthropology as a less established, unfamiliar field of inquiry with relatively less promotable relevance to marketing (Peter and Olsen 1983) than either psychology or economics, or as merely a set of unconventional data-gathering techniques (Hinshaw 1980) is another hindrance to cross-pollination.

That a common vision can be forged seems apparent. Marketing requires "a greater commitment to theory-driven programmatic research, aimed at solving cognitive and socially significant problems" (Anderson 1983). Anthropology needs to "transcend the narrow, reactive advocacy role of championing the alienated worker and to assume a more proactive, advisory role in drafting and implementing humane strategic plans at the corporate organization level" (Sherry 1983b). It is the perceptual chasm of ethics and social responsibility--the practical consequences of marketing decisions supported by social scientific research--that many anthropologists refuse to bridge:

To the extent that the spread of industrial capitalism may be held responsible for the "marginalization and immiseration of the world's poor" (Hoben 1982), we have been critical of corporate enterprises that fuel the processes of disenfranchisement at home and abroad. When governments have been destabilized (as in Chile), when the health of consumers has been jeopardized (as in the marketing of infant formula and various pharmaceuticals in the Third World), when products become a threat to healthy socialization (as in the marketing of such video games as *Custer's Revenge*), when culture change itself becomes dysfunctional (as in Harris' (1981) account of the aborted "American dream"), anthropologists have taken corporations to task. This tradition of critically appraising and assessing culpability, of gauging the social impact of business activities, has culminated in Taussig's (1980) eloquent discussion of the shaping by commodity fetishism of epistemology and praxis. (Sherry 1983:25)

This refusal, which on the one hand has enabled anthropological associations to assist indigenous peoples in adapting to the frequently destructive consequences of modernization (Nash 1981), has on the other hampered the transition from village to corporation required of "studying up", largely by restricting a holistic viewpoint. Gerlach's (1980) work on the infant formula controversy is exceptional in this regard. Some anthropological proponents of an anachronistic code of professional ethics view themselves as "defending the discipline's humanistic tradition against those who would domesticate its critical thrust, who would like to depoliticize...anthropology, making it more

acceptable to government and business..." (Hakken and Lessinger 1987,3). Ironically, the most pervasive yet most under-researched of consumer behaviors--low involvement activity--although eminently accessible to anthropological perspective, is essentially invisible given this antipathetic disposition. Thus, relative and long term innocuousness or triviality of most purchase behavior (aside from Taussig's (1980) insightful observation quoted above) remains to be gauged. It is one thing to facilitate a shift in consumer preference from one brand of fast-food hamburger to another, and quite another to abet the degradation of tropical forest ecosystems (and the indigenous cultures dependent upon them) that our escalating demand for processed food has precipitated. To assess accurately consumer demand, to provide feedback on the long term consequences (individual and systemic) of alternate methods of meeting that demand, and to facilitate informed consent at all levels of consumer decision making are reasonable tenets of a common vision. The provision of a stimulating exercise in comparative ethics is the least expectation that a dialogue would fulfill.

Additional impediments to the forging of a common vision might profitably be framed in terms of problems to be explored. The issues of proprietary research and the engineering of consent have already been broached. The nature, malleability and consequences of behaviors such as acquisitiveness or of philosophies such as materialism are of particular concern to consumer researchers and marketers (Belk 1984a, 1984b), and both biological and cultural anthropologists; such factors must ultimately determine the pro- or antisocial ends toward which the marketing process may be turned. Formal and informal regulation of this process--differential access of consumers to marketplace phenomena--affects the degree to which "consumerism" may be understood as a progressive, protective social movement, or a social pathology producing relative deprivation (Douglas 1976, Harris 1979). Whether the so-called globalization of markets which we are currently witnessing is a desirable, irreversible trend resulting in the improvement of the life chances of all participants, and which should be catalyzed and managed by standardized marketing interventions (Levitt 1983), or an undesirable, reversible manifestation of ethnocentric conceptions of progress which disrupts the ecological, social and psychological balance of its unwilling conscripts, and which should be arrested or redirected by enlightened social policy (Barnet and Muller 1974; Bodley 1982) is a topic in urgent need of joint exploration (Sherry 1987b). Our knowledge of the adoption and diffusion of innovations requires revision (Reilly and Wallendorf 1984; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983; Arnould and Wilk 1984). Research into consumption and marketing factors contributing to commerciogenic disease (Gerlach 1980), dietary degradation (Whiteford 1983), social disruption (including forced emigration, deskilling, household decomposition, etc.) attendant upon the new international division of labor (Barkun 1983, Fernandez-Kelly 1983, Safa 1983, Sassen-Koob 1983), and waste and inefficient use of resources

(Rathje 1974; Sprague and Shimkin 1981) might be undertaken, and the findings used to frame marketing-oriented solutions to these problems.

Perhaps the quickest and most productive tack to pursue in forming an alliance of disciplines would be to alert marketers and consumer researchers to the predisposition of anthropologists toward advocacy, and to apprise anthropologists of the existence not only of social, macro- and nonprofit marketing, as well as consumer research, but also of the variety of regulatory bodies interested in applied consumer research. Such a "back door" introduction to contemporary consumer issues might serve a subtle, socializing purpose in anthropology's transition from an ethnocentric to a relativistic view of marketing proper. The publicizing of successful marketing solutions to indigenous consumer problems routinely addressed by anthropologists, as in the case of Sacha Runa Foundation's empowerment of native entrepreneurs in the service of local health care delivery (Whitten and Whitten 1977), is another appropriate vehicle. The recent volume on anthropological praxis by Wulff and Fiske (1987) contains a number of such cases.

CONCLUSION

As linking-pin disciplines in their distinctive intellectual domains, marketing, consumer research and anthropology can provide some unique synergies to analysts willing to merge the varied perspectives. A rationale for such a merger has been offered in this note, and guidelines for implementation are emerging in the target disciplines (Baba 1986; Serrie 1984; Sherry 1987a). As a realignment of strategic visions is accomplished, debate over appropriate methodology for truly interdisciplinary research will inevitably intensify. The unfortunate wrangling between positivist and nonpositivist antagonists (Sherry 1987c), and the ideological pigeon-holing of research traditions into categories such as sophisticated falsificationist and interpretivist (Calder and Tybout 1987) threaten to obscure the paramount issue in any discussion of methods: the need for problem-driven selection of paradigms in research into marketing and consumer behavior. Lett's (1987) argument, provocative and persuasive at turns, that researchers must learn to compare and evaluate incommensurable paradigms, grows increasingly cogent in the postmodern environment (Sherry 1989) of consumer research. By overcoming the stereotypic conceptions shared by many researchers of each others' chosen pursuits, a powerful alliance may be forged. This note has attempted to nudge interdisciplinary inquiry a little further into the agendas of researchers seeking novel approaches to the study of fundamental human behaviors.

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