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Exploring the 'ethical everyday': An ethnography of the ethics of family consumption

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ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic research with six families in the North West of England (2007–2009), this paper opens up the 'black box' of everyday ethical consumption by adding colour and form to these everyday experiences. While recent geographical literature has recognised the ethical considerations that are implicit in everyday consumption practices, there is a noticeable void of research that explores and fleshes out the everyday ethical actions of individuals and families as consumers. By exploring the everyday ethics of money, waste and health choices in family consumption practices, this paper makes the case for recognising the ethical nature of everyday practices and choices of consumption. It is argued that rather than consumers subscribing to a given set of ethics in consumption, there are multiple ways of recognising consumption as an ethically-embedded process.

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the everyday ethics and ethical negotiations of family consumption practices. This concept of the 'ethical everyday' is used to describe the ways in which ethics, or the moral guidelines that we use to inform our conduct (Proctor, 1999; Smith, 2000; Valentine, 2004), may be expressed in everyday practices, such as consumption. Discussions in Geography surrounding ethics and morality emerged in the 1990s, marked by a substantial number of publications, conference topics, and dialogue between the social sciences and philosophy, coined as the 'moral turn' (Smith, 1997, 2000). This moral turn brought up themes of responsibility, obligation and care, between people and the environment. Geographical research has since expanded to explore ethical issues in a range of contexts, including consumption practices. Consumption may be defined as the 'use of goods and services in which the object or activity becomes simultaneously a practice in the world and a form in which we construct our understandings of ourselves in the world' (Miller, 1995, p. 30). Consumer items may therefore be transformed from their materiality, to become tools and resources for the expression of our (moral) identities, depending upon how we use and appropriate them. However, the relationship between morals and consumption is not a contemporary notion (see Clarke, 2008; Hilton, 2004; Slater, 2003), but is founded on long-standing ideas about the nature of consumption as an everyday ethical practice.

1.1. Consumption as an ethical practice

Consumption is an essential everyday process; 'to live is to consume' (Borgmann, 2000, p. 418). By its very nature, consumption is morally significant; as an intimate interaction between human and non-human (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997), between people and the environment. According to Wilk (2001, p. 246) 'consumption is, in essence a moral matter, since it always and inevitably raises issues of fairness, self vs. group interests, and immediate vs. delayed gratification [...] moral debate about consumption is an essential and ancient part of human politics'. In this sense, the very negotiations upon which consumption is based (Clarke, 1991; Sayer, 2003; Warde, 1997)—moral concepts such as justice and power, and basic ethical principles of right vs. wrong and good vs. bad—render consumer behaviour as an outlet for the expression of personal ethics. The narratives and practices of consumers such as the families discussed in this paper are a means of reflecting but also (re)constructing personal ethics. Everyday behaviours and practices may therefore serve to reinforce and renegotiate our moral dispositions as an active way of shaping our ethical beliefs.

Consumers of today are thought to play an active and skilled role in the consumption process (Barnett et al., 2004) and to be actively aware of their influence as a 'consuming body' (Bell and Valentine, 1997). The corporeal nature of consumption – that foods (and other items, such as cosmetics and medicines) are ingested into the body (Fine, 2002) – means that our consumption may also impact upon our appearance and health. Goodman and Goodman (2001, p. 98) describe this corporeality as our 'metabolic relations with nature'. Recent ethical consumer debates have also brought

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some of these issues to the fore, such as the increasing demand for (supposedly pesticide-free) organic production (Clarke et al., 2008; Dombos, 2008; Guthman, 2004; Tullock and Lupton, 2002) and concerns about farm animal welfare and potential health impacts further down the food chain (Roe, 2006; Watts, 2004). However, these discourses of ethical consumption have spread beyond the corporeal nature of consumption, to encompass humanitarian debates, such as exploited labour (Hale and Opondo, 2005; Silvey, 2004) and fair trading (Dolan, 2008; Nicholls and Opal, 2005), and ecological concerns such as sustainability (Hobson, 2003; Seyfang, 2004) and local production (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Pratt, 2008).

However, as this paper will explore, these moral considerations are added to an already complicated and ethically complex decision-making process, in which consumers also have to consider factors such as affordability, health, quality, preference and convenience (Howard and Willmott, 2001; Slater, 2003). Consumption is a means by which people may express their moral obligations. As Devault (1991) suggests, there is value in recognising the everyday ethical aspects of care, as a moral and societal obligation or virtue, such as feeding the family, and the conflicts between personal desire and social things (see Gilligan, 1982). As a matter of choice and moral obligation, consumption is a practice that enables people to assert responsibility and ethics through their decision-making (see Barnett et al., 2005). However, we know very little about everyday ethical dilemmas of everyday consumption and the moral tensions of everyday consumption decision-making.

With a focus on family dynamics and consumption strategies, this paper opens up the 'black box' of everyday ethical consumption, adding colour and form to these everyday experiences. Using ethnographic research with six families in the North West of England it is posed that, by addressing the grounded, real-life nature of everyday consumption, we can gain further insight into how such everyday practices are intertwined with, and are a form of, moral negotiations. This involves recognising the ethical decisions people make as part of their daily consumption choices, and the means by which the 'ethical everyday' can be appropriately researched.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, I explore the literature surrounding ethics and consumption, namely ethical consumption (Section 2.1) and ethics in everyday consumption (Section 2.2). The ethnographic research design and methodologies are then outlined in Section 3. In Section 4 I discuss and analyse the ethnographic findings, arranged into three themes; 'money' (Section 4.1), including 'needs and wants' (Section 4.1.1) and 'planning ahead' (Section 4.1.2); 'waste' (Section 4.2), such as 'waste as negligence' (Section 4.2.1) and 'resourcefulness' (Section 4.2.2); and 'health' (Section 4.2), discussing 'medical conditions' (Section 4.3.1) and 'dieting' (Section 4.3.2). The paper ends with a number of brief conclusions (Section 5).

2. Ethics and consumption

As discussed in Section 1.1, consumption is a means of expressing our moral identities and an outlet for ethical obligations. In more recent years, ethical aspects of consumption have come under greater scrutiny, with the emergence of ethical consumption discourses. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 will explore these discourses and the ways in which the everyday ethical aspects of consumption have been marginalised within ethical consumption.

2.1. Ethical consumption

Interest in ethical or alternative economies, with their transparent production practices and informed, knowledgeable consumers, coincided with the height of the 'moral turn' (McGregor, 2006; Nicholls and Opal, 2005). The term 'ethical economies' can be used to describe 'a variety of approaches affecting trade in goods and services produced under conditions that are socially and/or environmentally as well as financially responsible' (Blowfield, 1999, p. 754). As part of these ethical economies, an increase in ethical production techniques and accountability procedures, such as the introduction of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and ethical trading initiatives (ETI), has been concurrent with a growing consumer interest in the production of consumer goods, here referred to as ethical consumption (Freidberg, 2007; Hughes, 2006; Hughes et al., 2007; Sadler, 2004; Zyglidopoulos, 2002). To date, ethical production processes have dominated the study of ethical economies, although more recently there has been an increased academic interest in so-called ethical consumption practices (Barnett et al., 2005).

Since the early 1990s, the term 'ethical consumption' has been applied to describe an alternative set of consumption behaviours and practices (Carrigan et al., 2004; Moor and Littler, 2008), as the term favoured in the UK context (see Clarke, 2008). Indeed, 'Ethical Consumer' magazine was launched in the UK in 1989, and describes itself as 'a driving force behind the ethical consumer movement' (www.ethicalconsumer.org). Ethical consumption practices are regularly characterised as consumption activities that avoid harm to other people, animals or the environment (Harrison et al., 2005). The term 'ethical consumption' is currently associated with a range of consumer behaviours and responsible business practices (Carmichael, 2001). Also, according to Nicholls and Opal (2005), ethical consumption is the result of improved available information on, and transparency of, consumer products and how they are made. Additionally, Bryant and Goodman (2004, p. 348) propose that 'ethical' products 'shout to consumers about the socio-natural relations under which they were produced'. When these processes are made visible to consumers, such knowledge and insight may enable them to make informed decisions (Freidberg, 2003; Hilson, 2008; Moor and Littler, 2008).

The Ethical Consumer movement is also grounded in a growing dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the production practices of many multi-national companies and the harmful consumption choices of Western consumers (Clarke et al., 2007; McGregor, 2006). As Barnett et al. (2005, p. 26) explain,

> There has been the emergence of initiatives and movements campaigning around such issues as fair trade, corporate social responsibility, and sustainable consumption [...] It is this family of activities that we refer to here as ''ethical consumption''.

Ethical consumption is thought to require making (considered and informed) adaptations to one's consumer lifestyle, with the aim of reducing our negative effects on the environment, people and animals (Clark, 2006). Terms such as fair trade (Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Clarke et al., 2007; Dolan, 2008), local (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Pratt, 2008; Seyfang, 2006), organic (Clarke et al., 2008; Dombos, 2008), sustainability (Hobson, 2003; Seyfang, 2004), co-operative (Lang and Gabriel, 2005), environmental responsibility (Harrison et al., 1996; Hobson, 2006), and community (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007) are all discussed as part of ethical consumption narratives.

The practices associated with ethical consumption also play an important role in the construction of discourse. To be an ethical consumer is thought to involve some sort of behavioural change (Hobson, 2003), motivated by increased knowledge and understandings of production practices and/or the effects of consumption choices (Bickerstaff and Walker, 2001; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000). These changes can take a range of forms, but the 'ethical consumption' discourse leans more towards particular products that enable consumers to express their ethics. As part of