

Ethical consumerism: everyday negotiations in the construction of an ethical self

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Fluidity and context in ethical lifestyles

- Ethical consumers negotiate a personalised set of consumer practices. These are often based on mediated/socialised 'ethical' actions, and negotiated in line with personal beliefs and desires.
- Not all ethics are constructed or practised in the same way.
- Not all product areas are equally subject to ethical practices
- Ethical consumerism is practised differently in different contexts.

Sample

- Became ethical consumers 10, 20, 30 years ago
- Their ethics were acceptable to society, but acting on them was outside social norms
- Now 'normal'. At the time had negative identity connotations: weird, gullible, idealistic and embarrassing

Methodology

- Recruited consumers with animal welfare, fair trade and environmental ethics
- Held two interviews - one outside the home; one in the home working through cupboards
- Looked at three sets of products: food, cleaning and personal hygiene products

Justifications and resistance discourses

- Many consumers were surprised by how little they did
- ‘Doing my bit’ but ‘can only do so much’
- Offer a moral justification for not acting in accordance with their ethics
- Also resisting ‘undesirable actions’ discursively

Lesley: When I came to think about it I thought ‘well I am not really an ethical consumer in many ways’, because you can see what it is that you want to do and you want to be selective and everything, but actually, practically, in everyday life you can’t quite meet your ideals.

Amy: You don’t have a choice...I hadn’t realised it to such an extent until I started to look at what we did buy and what are beliefs are, and a lot of the things we buy don’t really match our beliefs

Becoming an ethical consumer

- Process over time
- Tends to start with one ethical area and extend to others
- Often time and context specific
- Generally with some level of social support
- Starts as 'intense' and 'all-consuming' but becomes more habitual over time

Motivating factors

- Moral shock/hot cognition
- Health problems
- Sub-culture membership
- Family
- Religion
- Role models
- Campaigns, media and academia

Freedom to be ethical

- Changing moralities of society (Jo)
- Negotiations within families (shared values)
- Close affinity between lifestyle, personal goals and consumer ethics (Colby and Damon)
- Strength of ethics
- Rationalising with additional information and values

Jo: On the question of exploitation, we only became aware of it in the 60s, well 70s, 80s when I think these things were talked about more. Friends of the Earth became very active, and then one started to notice them and become educated in these matters. We took it for granted that tea came from here and coffee from there...Also I took it for granted that tea workers, they worked on the plantations, all right, but they weren't, but having lived in India you knew that they lived in that way and you didn't question it. It is only, the word exploitation really came into my thinking more with regards to the food I was eating much, much later.

Colby and Damon (1993) in their work on the development of extraordinary moral commitment found that a high degree of connection between personal goals and moral goals was instrumental in allowing moral behaviour. The unity of self and ethics reduced the conflict between different desires which could prevent action. Therefore, those people whose moral goals are central to their personal identity will be more likely to act on a belief than others who hold the same belief, but regard it as peripheral to their lifestyle. The link between the importance of moral concerns to a sense of the self and action, is reflected in the unity between judgement and conduct. The constancy of identity and ethics leaves the individual feeling that they have no choice other than to follow through their moral beliefs.

Ethics are not all practised equally

- The three sets of ethics I explored tended to be practised differently
- For example, fair trade had the least level of complaint about higher pricing
- Vegan and vegetarianism the most consistently practised

Me: What if you were out somewhere, would that bother you ..?

Mary: If it wasn't organic? No, it wouldn't.

Me: what about the coffee if you were out?

Mary: Well, I wouldn't, if they had it in the shop I would go for the fair trade one, but they don't most of the time, so if I'm out I'll drink whatever.

Me: Why not? This sounds silly, but is that just for ease or what?

Mary: Well a lot of it is just like if you are in a café or restaurant say, if you say 'oh have you got this fair trade coffee?' and they'd look at you like..you know. So most of the time it is not available.

Me: Right, what about something like soya marg if you were out?

Mary: Oh yeah, if I was out sometimes I just can't eat. I mean I go to a café and I have to ask them not to put butter or whatever on my bread if they give me a sandwich.

Me: Okay, so why's that? I mean is that because it is easier to remain vegan when you are out than to buy organic, or because you feel it is more important to stay vegan than to keep buying organic things when you are out, or why?

Mary: Um, it's because I'm vegan and I can't eat it. I mean I can drink coffee whether it is organic or not. I know it is better if I drink organic, but it is not going to interfere with my diet.

Genealogy and form of ethic

- Determines how it is acted upon
- Identity ethics are subject to high levels of normalisation and social surveillance
- Absolutes and identity ethics can command more consistent behaviour than other, more important ethics formulated differently

Different ethics are constructed differently

- Animal welfare and fair trade have clear I-thou relationships and efficacy
- Environmental ethics were more complex, with personal risk and 'fluffy animals' the most likely to motivate action
- Environmental ethics were the most discussed and tended to be constructed on agency, rather than efficacy, lines
- **But everyone will negotiate their own set of consumer ethics**

Negotiating ethical consumerism

- Frequently a triumph over structural adversity
- Yet cannot, and do not want to, only make ethical choices
- Thresholds which limit ethical behaviour
- Convenience, price, lack of availability, lack of knowledge, pleasure

Telfer's (1996) four factors that limit our obligation to follow an ethical code:

- Preserving the integrity of another ethic/value
- giving precedence to those we care about
- providing for our own happiness
- having a worthwhile life

Ethics are practised differently for different product areas

- Those with a strong environmental or animal welfare ethic in food may not buy many ethical cleaning or personal hygiene products
- Naughty or pleasurable products may well release the consumer from ethical action.

Example: healthy, natural products

- All consumers claimed that their different animal welfare diets (organic, vegetarian, vegan, meat eating) were the most healthy/natural
- However, other health or bodily duties were more important than natural/non-animal tested products
- If it allows the body to sweat, rot or ail it has no cultural value, which limits the action it can command

Me: Do you worry about animal testing for your contact lens solutions?

Lisa: No, I don't think about it to be honest. Yeah, I am not as keyed up on all things as I could be. I am, I don't know whether these are, I can't imagine that saline solution is particularly harmful to, well I am sure it is not harmful to whatever it is tested on.

Me: Are you as concerned about animal testing as you are about animal farming?

Lisa: I am, yeah.

Me: So do the two go together?

Yes, I think they do, but I think that unconsciously I have considered them differently because, um, if I had been buying a particular chemical or something for years I tend to carry on doing it without really think about it, but you know if you are vegetarian then you always have it in mind when you go shopping for food.

Lizzie: It is the same as the medical thing. To me this is a medical thing.

Lesley: For quite a while I didn't use any deodorant. At least I don't mean that, for quite a while I tried to use a Friends of the Earth crystal thing and I just didn't find that it worked at all. Maybe if I was doing a less active job it wouldn't be a problem, but I've tried all different things from health food shops and nothing actually works. So something that says on it, like Sure 24 hour, that is very tempting to buy and so that is what I use.

The role of pleasure

- Often pleasurable or desirable foods released the consumer from her ethics.
- Often already ‘naughty’ areas - such as cakes or alcohol
- Tend to be product areas without ingredient listing or ethical marking

Under conditions of uncertainty:

- Consumers fetishise their knowledge and construct their agency to allow themselves the freedom to undertake certain ethics actions
- Feign ignorance and minimise their efficacy to allow themselves the freedom to avoid undertaking undesirable ethic actions

Cherry: It's not so much information as much as common sense. When you take a product and you actually look at it, for example Tizer and you think about the packaging, where it's come from, what additives are in it, you know, it's quite, you just have to apply the amount of knowledge you know about corporate business to the commodities you are consuming.

Cherry: If I ever buy a can of Coca-Cola it will be on my own. It won't be with any of my friends. I'm sure that, well I'm not sure at all actually. I don't know enough about Coca-Cola as a company to know who they shit on. And my dad's just got back from Australia and said that the Aborigines in the National Park were performing to the tourists and he got talking to them and discovered they were sponsored by Coca-Cola.

Jane: Actually we were laughing about that Guinness. All this weekend we seemed to be drinking Guinness. Mostly vegans, and I was saying to my friend Doris who works for the Vegan Society, and we were saying that God we hadn't really thought about the drink thing so much, but other vegans would be really strict on that. We know that there is one can or the bottle that is vegan, but we haven't even bothered to look it up, so we are obviously not that concerned about it. So we've been thinking about that, but if there wasn't a label on it, and I wasn't absolutely sure I would possibly have it. Like there were these chocolate doughnuts where my daughter goes for her dance class and you know they were just in the corner in the bakery and I could not resist. And I quite enjoyed eating that cos I had no idea what was in it.

Jane: I think it's just the reason I'm doing it is to avoid the animal cruelty and I know that one little thing isn't going to make any difference. Right, but I am also doing it as a consumer and I know it is a very small difference. I'm only doing it for my conscience I suppose, so in those cases I'm not bothered about a tiny bit of that in my system and I know it is not going to make a huge difference.

Discourses of agency and resistance

- When people are motivated to act: ‘doing my bit’, ‘common sense’, ‘doing something is better than doing nothing’
- When people do not want to act: ‘small cog in a big wheel’, ‘makes little difference’, ‘lack of knowledge/scientific certainty’
- Need to reduce uncertainty and highlight agency/efficacy

Ethical consumerism is practised differently in different contexts

- Home - strong degree of control, but moral economy of the household needs to be negotiated
- Outside - often a 'captured market' which releases consumer from criticisms of inconsistency
- Eating at others - primacy of grace
- Workplace - dependent on type of work

Home

- Least amount of justification for inaction
- Felt subject to surveillance from outside
- Negotiate with children and partners
- Always subject to external pressures from peer groups, advertising etc
- Often had several different types of the same product

Outside the home

- Vegetarian and vegan ethics still command consistency
- Captured market means that there was little freedom to be ethical for other ethics
- Felt less subject to external and internal criticisms in not following through their ethics

Eating at others

- Requires a negotiation of ethical positioning with the primacy of grace towards the host
- Commands the greatest level of negotiation/lowest level of ethical action
- The precedence of others and social expectations of politeness
- Ethical consumerism as a polite revolution

At work

- Work is an important area for the fulfilment of life projects - as ethics are so central to these consumers' lifestyles they frequently work in related areas.
- Often tried to introduce more ethical practices into the work place
- Working in a non-related job created tensions with ethical consumerism

Lesley: You are kind of having to do things that you don't like. So at times you are trying not to think about things. So say I have been at work all day, and then dashed around the shops to buy something, I might not be so thoughtful as I had been on a day off.

Conclusions

- Ethical consumer choices are based on a personalised set of socially constructed ethical behaviours, which are mediated by personal values and desires - everyone will choose a different set of practices
- Like all lifestyle choices they are fluid and contextual
- Marginal consumer behaviour has been at the vanguard of changing social norms and has opened up the freedom for ethical choices to be mainstream

Implications for behaviour change campaigns

- Targeting small committed groups may help open up the freedom for behavioural mainstreaming
- Lifestyle based campaigns have to be situated within meaningful lives
- Create supportive discourses of agency and efficacy to counteract discourses of resistance
- Try to utilise identity ethics and absolute actions