

## Participatory Consumerism

People behave as they do in a consumer society because they are so indoctrinated into the logic of the market that they cannot "see" anything wrong with what they are doing. Because they do not critically challenge the market ideology and what it means to live in a consumer society, they actually contribute to their own oppression (slaves of the market and capitalism) and the oppression of others who make the goods and of the natural ecosystem. Participatory consumerism, a new conceptualization of consumerism introduced in this paper, involves unveiling the world of oppression of the everyday citizen in their consumer role, expelling the market myths created and perpetuated by free market proponents and a consumer society and socializing people to be global citizens first and consumers second.

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### Introduction

"Socialization is a broad term for the whole process by which an individual develops, through transaction with other people, his[/her] specific patterns of socially relevant behaviours and experience" (Zigler & Child, 1969, p.474). Through this process, people learn culturally accepted social roles and the behaviour associated with these roles. One of the roles for which people are socialized is that of consumption (Vanier Institute of the Family, 1994). "Consumer socialization is defined as processes by which young people [and even adults] acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (Ward, 1981, p.382). Socialization into a consumer role is a function of: (a) age or stage in life cycle, (b) social structural constraints, (c) agents of socialization, (d) learning processes, and (e) the content which is learned (Moschis, 1987). Gaining a better understanding of this process provides insights into how people acquire motivations, attitudes and behaviours about the global marketplace (Carlson et al., 1994).

The author is concerned with excessive and thoughtless consumption patterns and the need for consumer participation in addressing the problems generated from this behaviour. The discussion generated by this paper may facilitate eventual change in the consumer socialization process from current to reflective, participatory consumption practices. Following the logic of the participatory development movement, the author proposes that, in order to get nearer to a mode of consumption that has integrity and is sustainable, a participatory approach is needed. The concept to be developed in this paper is *participatory consumerism*.<sup>1</sup> To cultivate this idea, the concepts of participatory and consumerism will be explored and then integrated in the latter part of the paper leading to a new way to conceptualize our approach to socializing people into their consumption role.

### Participation as a Concept

Mikkelsen (1995) acknowledges that there is still a lack of conceptual clarity for the concepts of participation and participatory and maybe this precision is not necessary. The Webster's Dictionary definition of participation is the state of being related to a larger whole by taking part, sharing and contributing. In the area of participatory development, participatory is often taken to mean that those who are affected by the development initiative must be party to the process. Ideally, they will initiate, conceptualize, manage and evaluate the process. A useful distinction is made between instrumental and transformational participation. Instrumental involves engagement in measurable activities towards a

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<sup>1</sup>Duncombe (1997) also uses the term 'participatory consumerism' but in the context of the zine phenomenon (pronounce z' ne) of home made, micro-magazines, a popular form of underground publishing (zine is short for fanzine, instead of magazine).

predetermined goal, for example, local people participating in an outsider's project and doing so to certain standards within a set time frame. Transformational participation entails higher objectives, namely achievement of self-help and sustainable results. Such transformation consists of voluntary involvement of people in self-determined change of themselves, their lives and their environment (Mikkelsen).

When discussing participatory citizenship, Parker (1989) notes that sustained dialogue about public problems and aspirations is the backbone to a democratic community. He refers to participation as deliberation on public issues among the people themselves rather than just at the government level. Barber (1989) further explains that participatory democracy entails listening to others, meaning "I will put myself in his[her] place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike" (p.356). He suggests that the role of listening has to be balanced with one of talking, but we should talk to reveal as well as to be rationale. Talking and listening (both forms of participating) can build community and a common humanity. More profoundly, Barber concludes that listening and talk is not talk *about* the world but talk that *makes and remakes the world*, meaning some form of action is taken as a result of the talking. Finally, he proposes that all three of listening, talking and acting have to occur in public venues rather than just in private homes, thereby leading to public discourse which is not possible without participation. He convincingly argues that participatory citizenship and democracy lead to more self-assured citizens, secure in their ability to contribute to their own future and that of the nation.

Also in the area of citizenship participation, Newmann (1989) recognizes the concern for what people *should* think about as they participate in civic actions. He refers to this as reflective participation and asks the question, 'what help do people need as they try to participate reflectively and productively'? He advises that we: (a) nurture a culture of conversation in our schools leading to authentic discourse, (b) devise ways to maintain a sense of personal integrity while participating in democracy, (c) acknowledge and find ways to deal with the stress inherent in new responsibilities stemming from active participation that influences peoples' lives, and (d) structure our participation and conversations such that we achieve feelings of efficacy (competency) rather than powerlessness due to the sheer scope of commitment and issues. If a sense of powerlessness emerges, people will be less inclined to participate.

Those advocating for participatory action research (those who are affected are involved) are also concerned with the concept of participatory. Vaines (1994) states, "nothing can change the condition of humans unless and until people change themselves by actively participating and caring for each other in the local personal level" (p.61). Peterat (1997) notes that any attempts to deal with common problems of life must take seriously the participation of the community and its members in any study concerning its problems. She notes that participatory action research, because of the participation, enables people to become more human, gain confidence and enter new ways to learn. Participation leads to people finding new ways to think about themselves in the world, to see the world differently, and to see themselves in relation to others. Participatory action research, because of participation, enables people to commit themselves to constructive action instead of detachment. This participation promotes empowerment as well as new understandings of the causes of their powerlessness and oppression (Brown, 1985). Brown explains that participatory research makes unfamiliar demands on the people involved. The skill base for researchers and educators changes from technical how-to skills to facilitator, interactive, shared responsibility mind sets. Importantly, participation generates the capacity to change social structures (e.g., the marketplace, labour market, schools, government, etc) and conditions. Participating allows people to ask questions and prompts them to explore the situation and reflect on what they find or do not find (Engberg, 1996).

### **Consumerism as a Concept**

Gabriel and Lang (1995) recognize that the concept of consumerism means different things to different people in different contexts but it is possible to identify at least five different approaches. They propose that (a) consumerism is the essence of the good life and a vehicle for freedom, power and happiness. Consumers have the ability to choose and enjoy material objects and experiences (services). (b) Consumerism supplements work, religion and politics as the main mechanism by which social status and distinction are achieved. Displays of all of the goods accumulated gains prestige and envy - the ideology of conspicuous consumption. (c) Consumerism is also seen as the pursuit of ever higher standards of living thereby justifying global development and capitalism via trade and internationalism of the marketplace. (d) Consumerism is a social movement seeking to protect the consumer against excesses of business and to promote the rights of consumers (concerns for value for money and quality of goods and services). Finally, (e)

consumerism is coming to be seen as a political gambit to gain power. States (governments) are moving away from the paternalistic mode of service provider and protector of citizens to privatization of services that can be bought in the private market from corporations (Gabriel & Lang).

Leaving off the concepts of privatization and the social movement, the author is concerned with, and defines, consumerism as the misplaced belief (the myth) that the individual will be gratified by consuming (culmination of items a, b and c from the previous paragraph). Consumerism in this sense is an acceptance of consumption as a way to self-development, self-realization and self-fulfilment. In such a consumer society, an individual's identity is tied to what s/he consumes. People buy more than they need for basic subsistence and are concerned for their self-interest rather than mutual, communal interest or ecological interest. What ever maximizes individual happiness is best, equated to accumulation of goods and use of services (Goodwin, Ackerman & Kiron, 1997). Consumerism, thus constructed, is "economically manifested in the chronic purchasing of goods and services, with little attention to their true need, durability, origin of product or the environmental consequences of manufacture and disposal" (Verdant, 1997, web citation).

Because this kind of consumerism sets each person against him/her self in an endless quest for the attainment of material things (Verdant, 1997), few people give thought to whether their consumption habits produce class inequality, alienation, or repressive power. They are concerned with the "stuff of life" rather than with "quality of life", least of all the quality of life of those producing the goods and services they consume. A consumer society, so defined, is one in which discretionary consumption has become a mass phenomenon, not just the province of the rich or even the middle class (Schor, 1999). Consumption in a consumer society leads to materialism, defined as a culture where material interests are primary and supercede, are even subservient to, other social goals (Friedman, 1993). Durning (1992) claims that people living in a consumer culture attempt to satisfy social, emotional and spiritual needs with material things.

Wisalo (1999) suggests that such consumerism occurs because of human's insecurity in their hearts and minds. Ironically, people allegedly consume to gain this security. He says that people feel they can become a new person by purchasing those products which support their self-image of who they are, want to be and where they want to go. Unfortunately, this approach to becoming a new person, to developing a sense of self, is unsustainable. People "under the influence of consumerism" never feel completely satisfied because owning something cannot help one meet the security of heart and mind, the deeper needs of humanity. Constantly spending and accumulating only gives short term fulfilment and relief from the need to have peace and security in life.

### **Participatory Consumerism As a Concept**

Pye-Smith (1999) claims "We shouldn't feel bad [sic] about consumption unless we are consuming badly. We need to understand how [and why] we are consuming and not get hung up about the fact that we are consuming" (p.25). The author assumes that this understanding will lead to revised consumer socialization processes, revised consumer behaviour patterns leading to purchasing habits that respect the environment, other people and those not yet born. Why are people participating in such unsustainable consumption patterns? Can they help themselves? Are they too programmed in the consumer culture to change their ways? This paper assumes that the answer is no, that people can be enabled to engage in 'participatory consumerism' (see Table 1).

#### **Table 1- Components of a Participatory Consumerism Approach**

- # public discourse - discussions among people about human citizenship issues, discussions shaped by listening, talking and acting such that the world changes for the better - *expanded consumer dialogue*
- # people seeing themselves as *citizens first* and consumers second
- # consumers seeing themselves *related to a larger whole* by taking part, sharing and contributing; that is, participating in their world as citizens who consume to meet basic needs
- # people *creating new knowledge* drawn from deeper insights into their mind and their heart about *why* they are consuming - reflection

- # equitable communities and societies that, for the time being, maintain a free market structure characterized by peace, social justice, security and freedom - *eventually...* strive for an *economy of care* - a moral economy
- # a dynamic consumption process of *action-reflection-revised action* due to reflective participation in the global village in one's consumption role
- # people will gain a *citizen consumer-conscience* whereby they become more human citizens not just more efficient consumers
- # includes: vulnerability, risk taking, uncertainty, trust, cooperation, public discourse, dialogue, openness with healthy suspicion, and patience with your's and others' impatience and fear

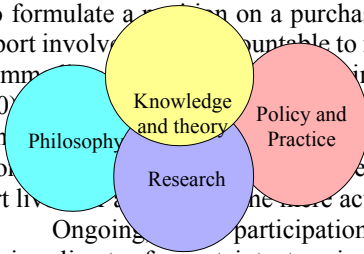
Participatory consumerism would be about personal and social transformation for the liberation of oppressed people in their consumption role. People who are oppressed are being exploited and taken advantage of due to their circumstances and who feel they cannot flee from, or change, what appears to be, irreversible conditions. In a consumer culture, people are so indoctrinated into the logic of the market that they cannot 'see' anything wrong with what they are doing. Because they do not critically challenge the market ideology and the myth of consumerism, they actually contribute to their *own oppression* (slaves of the market) and the oppression of others who make the goods and services and the oppression of the ecosystem. Strong, unsustainable consumption behaviour patterns develop, having been formed and unchallenged over a long period of time (paraphrased from Freire, 1985). Participatory consumerism would involve people creating new knowledge drawn from deeper insights into their mind and their heart about why they are consuming. These insights involve reflection, value clarification and socially responsible decisions that take into account known and unknown social, ecological and generational consequences. Reflection involves exploring one's own experiences in a conscious manner in order to acquire new understandings and new behaviour patterns (Suojanen, 1998). Participatory consumerism would produce a compassionate culture in addition to the existing consumer culture, maybe someday replacing it. The intent of participatory consumerism would be equitable communities and societies that maintain, for the time being, a free market structure characterized by justice, peace, security and freedom. Eventually, those practising participatory consumerism would strive for an economy of care, a moral economy to replace the current capitalistic driven market economy (Goudzwaard & de Lange, 1995).

People would be the essence of participatory consumerism not just money and profit. It is recognized that we all have to consume in order to meet daily, basic needs. But we do not have to do this at the expense of our soul, others or the ecosystem. To reiterate, participatory means a state of being related to a larger whole by taking part, sharing and contributing. Consumerism from this perspective would embrace ethical and moral issues, spiritual wellness, ecological soundness and both rights and responsibilities.

Transformational participation entails participation in such a way that sustainable results that will continue when the initiative is completed. Transformational participatory consumerism would involve an evolution wherein people would see themselves as world citizens first and consumers second. As Gabriel and Lang (1995) so aptly phrased it, a citizen is "a responsible consumer, a socially-aware consumer, a consumer who thinks ahead and tempers his or her desires by social awareness, a consumer whose actions must be morally defensible and who must occasionally be prepared to sacrifice personal pleasure to communal well-being" (pp.175-176). Hence, the notion of participatory citizenship is relevant in this discussion of participatory consumerism. Participatory citizenship involves discussion among people about public issues shaped by listening, talking and acting such that the world changes for the better. Applied to consumerism, similar public discourse would involve the implications of current consumption behaviour on the lives of others, future generations and the integrity of the ecosystem. Topics would include human rights, the environment, justice, living and working conditions, peace, security, freedom, and cultural sensitivity. This consumer dialogue goes a long way towards augmenting the current narrow consumer dialogue about how to get the best buy and value for dollar spent and how to protect the rights of the domestic consumer (safety, information, choice, redress etc) while at the same time ensuring profit for the firm and an appropriate regulatory role for government; that is, how to balance consumer, business and public interests.

Participatory consumerism would involve active reflection prior to, during and after purchase decisions. Reflective participation (Newmann, 1989) entails dealing with uncertainty while knowing that choices have to be made and action has to be taken (this action could be a decision not to purchase). Moral issues have to be dealt with, referring

to disagreements people may have about values that justify personal consumption actions. Reflective participation in the marketplace would also involve consciously deciding what one is going to reflect upon, appreciating that the main focus is to formulate a position on a purchase decision and then win support for it, internally and externally. Gaining this support involves being accountable to mutual interests as well as self-interest. Reflection allows one to step back from the immediate and define one's beliefs, attitudes and past behaviours in a dispassionate manner (Jackson, 1990). In the face of the need for instant gratification and material accumulation, features of the marketplace nonetheless, participatory consumerism would involve the dynamic process of reflection. A reflective moment may be prolonged for one type of consumer good or service and short lived for another. The act of reflection negates thoughtless purchasing decisions.



Ongoing participatory participation in consumption would help people to be ever curious, to take risks in their decision climate of uncertainty, to gain a better understanding of complicated realities comprising the global marketplace, and to gain enough power to work for improvement in their consuming role, and by association, the well-being of global citizens (paraphrased from Smith et al., 1995). Indeed, one can be a consumer while disagreeing and criticizing the marketplace in their role as citizen. An increased sensitivity to one's connectedness to others in the world's marketplace could be referred to as conscientization - gaining a conscience. This personal growth involves becoming more fully human, not just a more efficient consumer. To take us back to the beginning, participatory consumerism involves unveiling the world of oppression of the everyday citizen in their consumer role and expelling the market myths created and perpetuated by free market proponents. The results will be a conscientious citizen participating in their role of consumption with the interests of themselves balanced with the interests of society, future generations and the ecosystem. Perceiving citizens as "participating" consumers is a powerful way to extend the current dialogue around (a) sustainable consumption (a movement concerned with sustainable management of resources, considerations for the natural environment and societal processes of change), (b) the promotion of human dignity, quality of life and (c) the perspective of interdependence referring to the interplay between people and environments and the relationships between economies, nationally and internationally (Lafferty, 1994).

### Conclusion

This paper tendered the concept of participatory consumerism to propel consumer evolution and to provide a new way to understand socializing a citizen into their consumer role. Participatory consumerism is defined as people seeing themselves as a citizen first and a consumer second, a transformation that Gabriel and Lang (1995) recognize will be fraught with challenges but is necessary in today's consumer culture. In the spirit of participatory democracy, citizenship and reflection, this new form of consumerism involves vulnerability, risk-taking, trust, cooperation, public discourse and dialogue, openness with healthy suspicion and patience with impatience. This evolution will occur in conjunction with the conventional process of consumer decision making which traditionally involves a fairly narrow range of product or service attributes as choice criteria (price, quality and availability) (McGregor, 1999) Members of the consumer profession are encouraged to ask some very serious questions (see Figure 1) as they take this evolutionary step.

Figure 1 - Impact of Embracing Participatory Consumerism On the Field of Consumer Studies

How will personal philosophy have to transform?

How should consumer education/pedagogy change?

How should consumer research change?

How should consumer policy analysis change?

How should daily practice change?

How should the philosophy/mission/goals of the discipline change?

Research paradigms, approaches to policy analysis, theoretical orientations, personal philosophies and educational pedagogy (what is felt to be knowledge and how to share that knowledge) will all have to transform over time if we embrace the notion of participatory consumerism. Suggestions for new lines of thinking include: the critical science approach to family and consumer sciences, transformative learning, the participatory domain of learning (a very unused learning domain that extends the conventional cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains), life long learning, active learning, social constructivism, citizenship education, peace and social justice education, global education, and the human responsibility movement, to name the most salient. I invite you to join the dialogue!

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