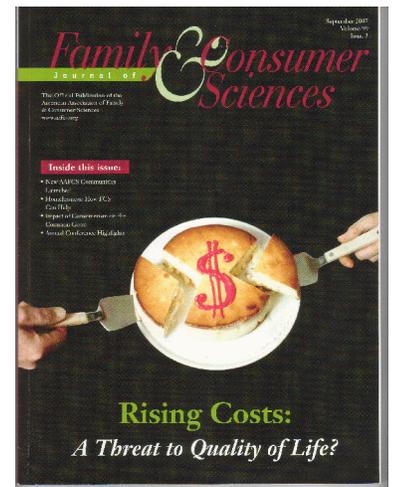


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Abstract

The intent of this paper is to inform FCS professional reflection about how to approach practice around the issue of individual consumer behaviour and the conditions of the shared commons and humanity. Complexity, emergence and patterns of relationship concepts are introduced as tools to reframe FCS's understandings of consumerism so it is seen to be interconnected with the common good and the human condition.



It is becoming increasingly clear that everyone's well being depends upon the quality of our common life, lived together on this planet (Parks-Daloz, Keen, Keen & Daloz-Parks, 1996). This thematic issue about *Rising Costs and Quality of Life* challenges us to reflect on how responsibility for ensuring basic rights for all is equally shared. In order to guide this process, we were asked to reflect on what the common good entails and how it relates to rising costs of living and quality of life, ideas that imply a connection between the common good and consumerism. People in a consumer society consume to improve their quality of life, and there are costs associated with this practice (financial, time, ecological, societal and human).

The results are often negative and consumers are often blamed for the decline in the integrity of the earth, family life, communities and society at large. But, they are not the only player in the market game. Consumers cannot make the needed changes alone, nor should they bear all of the blame for the fallout of living in a consumer society. This blame is unfair and often misplaced because consumers are not given information about the work, social, political, economic or justice conditions of the workers who make the products they purchase. It is just as difficult to obtain information about the environmental impact (New Community Project, 2005). What does Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) have to do differently to help people become more reflective and better at questioning their role in the world? What is involved in FCS helping people face the powerful societal messages that hold them accountable for progressive growth, instead of peace and stability, leading to an unhealthy commons?

The intent of this paper is to inform professional reflection about the role of individual consumer behaviour on the conditions of the shared commons and humanity. Complexity, emergence and patterns of relationship concepts are introduced as ways to reframe FCS's understandings of consumerism so it is seen to be interconnected with the common good and the human condition. As a caveat, learning about one's role in perpetuating less than responsible consumption can be discouraging, overwhelming, or disheartening. But, FCS are encouraged to step beyond the natural guilt and anger experienced when one's way of being in the world is challenged. They can begin to imagine what practice would look like if they engaged the issue of the rising costs of living in a consumer society, with the intent of enhancing the human condition and the shared commons.

The Common Good

The phrase 'the common good' contains two concepts: *common* and *good*. Common refers to something that belongs to, pertains to, and favours *the whole*. Good has many meanings. For this discussion, good will be accepted as something that affords a benefit to people such that their well-being is improved, leading to an enhanced health, happiness, prosperity and moral soundness. "The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments, on which we all depend, work in a manner that benefits all people" (Velasquez, Andre, Shanks & Meyer, 2006, p.1). Examples of elements from the commons that are good for everyone include: an accessible and affordable health care system; an effective system of public safety and security; and, just legal institutions and political systems. The commons also entails: peace among nations and within families and communities; an unpolluted natural environment; and, a fair, flourishing economic system with attendant institutions. Maintaining common conditions from which all humans benefit requires the cooperative effort of all of the world's citizens, an ideal often not realized, partly because consumerism circumvents this effort.¹

Consumerism

Although people may not be familiar with the idea, consumerism can be conceived as an institution or system. An institution is a custom, practice, relationship, or behavioral pattern of importance in the life of a community or society. If nothing else, consumer behaviour has become a central component of individual, family and community life. Consumption is now an established and stable way to organize the social, daily life of a people. People are socialized to see themselves as individuals in their consuming role with their own selfish interest at heart, viewing it as a daily activity to meet needs, and fulfil wants. The call for papers for this issue raised the questions, "At what cost? Who bears the burden?" Excessive consumption to live out a consumer life style can lead to an inordinate attachment to material things and possessions. This materialism occurs at great cost to the person consuming, to those who make the goods and services, to other species, and to the natural environment. The following text provides evidence that consumerism, as it looks today, is not good for the common good or humanity:

- Even though Northern² consumers comprise only 20% of the world's population, they consume more than 86% of the world's resources. They have 87% of all automobiles, 74% of all landline phones (does not include cell phones), use 84% of all paper, consume 58% of all energy, eat 45% of all fish and meat, and get 94% of all bank loans. This reality means that eight of 10 people in a room share 14% of all global consumption activities, representing a great divide in power and resources (UNESCO, 2002).

¹ For clarification, consumerism is understood to be an ideology with an attendant belief system and consumption is an activity that people engage in within the marketplace.

²The consumer class counts among its members most North Americans, West Europeans, Japanese, Australians, and the citizens of Hong Kong, Singapore, and oil sheikdoms of the Middle East (Hawken, 1994).

- Total global consumption levels exceeded the planet's ecological capacity in the late 1970s. We would need more than five planet Earths to sustain the world if the world's population consumed at the level of just two countries, the United States and Canada (Worldwatch Institute, 2004). What is even more telling is that citizens of these two countries are the least likely to pay more for organic, environmentally friendly or fair trade products (Global Market Insite, 2005).
- The consumer class spends more on luxury products, such as cruises, perfume, makeup, and ice cream (let alone necessities), than it would take to fund and achieve the United Nations's Millennium Development Goals (dealing with poverty, literacy, hunger, child and mother mortality, environmental sustainability, gender equality and empowerment, and disease) (Worldwatch Institute, 2004).
- By some estimates, 83 percent of all clothing purchased in United States and Canada is made elsewhere. That means 8 of 10 clothing items hanging in your closet are not made at home. The same reality holds for 8 toys, 9 sporting goods items, and 9 shoes in your closet. This is an issue because less than 1 percent of the final cost of a product is paid to the worker, who makes, on average, 15-25 cents U.S.\$ per hour. If you pay \$50.00 for an item, workers in another country receive less than 50 cents for producing it, and this amount is far below what they need for even the most basic sustenance (New Community Project, 2005).
- The entire *consumer infrastructure* is a key source of structural violence, meaning people are harmed somehow due to no cause of their own. This violence is enabled by consumers who, knowingly or unknowingly, embrace the ideology of consumerism. Nearly 4 of 10 clothing and apparel items for sale in United States and Canada are made in China, where workers are forbidden to organize to improve work conditions (sweatshops and child and prison labour). If people wanted to consume more fairly, it would be difficult as less than .01 percent of world trade is in the form of fair trade. That is even less than 1 in 100. And, when people are aware of these facts, most are not willing to pay more for a fair trade product. The system and consumer attitudes preclude consuming differently (Global Market Insite, 2005; McGregor, 2006a).
- Eight of 10 products purchased by members of the consumer class are made by girls aged 12-14 (meaning they are not in school). Typical sweatshop employees, 90 percent women, are young and uneducated (aged 16-25). Sweatshops are businesses that regularly violate wage agreements, the rights of women and child laborers, and many health, environment, and safety laws (Woolf, 2001)
- There are 2.2 billion children in the world. 1.9 billion of them (9 of 10) live in 'developing countries.'³ Nearly 250 million of them (13%) work in sweatshops, meaning one in every eighth child is not receiving public education, a reality that

³ The term *developing country* is a label meant to capture the idea that the economy is still in the developing stages (likely agricultural) relative to more advanced industrial and information based economies. It has taken on negative connotations because people assume that the whole country is developing when in fact languages, cultures and the like may be strong and thriving as gauged by contextual and indigenous standards.

does not bode well for their future well-being and quality of life (Shah, 2006; Woolf, 2001).

Rights, Responsibilities and the Human Condition

Contributors to this journal issue were challenged to link responsibility with the common good. A society that consumes in a way that people are exploited, marginalized and oppressed, even killed, raises alarm bells for the need for responsibility, morality and ethics (McGregor, 2006a, c). The universal commons is harmed when individuals' consumption choices are not governed by a sense of right and wrong (morality), and good and bad (ethics). From the implication that those who share the commons can expect to have their rights respected, if the world is our commons, then many people regularly have their rights trampled on. Those who walk loudly with heavy steps upon this world, for that is what the word *trample* means, are not taking full responsibility for the fallout from their consumption activities. Consequently, the *conditions* within which most humans live their daily lives are reduced in quality, in value, and in varying degrees, such that living becomes a relentless undertaking.

The Human Condition

It helps to know that the human condition concerns three events: how people came to be in their current situation, their current state of affairs, and what things could look like in the future. Applying these to this discussion, we can say that (a) the consumption actions that people take help create the conditions within which they and other people live. (b) The current state of affairs is one of injustice, inequality, lost opportunity, reduced potential, and huge power differentials leading to hopelessness and despair - not a pretty picture. (c) What does the future hold? Consumption takes place in the public realm, thereby affecting the common good. If we accept this premise, it follows that people are morally obligated to be more responsible and ethical in their consumption activity (McGregor, 2005, 2006a,c). They have a responsibility to see their consumption activity as an inherent component affecting the integrity of the common good and the human condition (Chen, 2003).

Reframing Consumption

Given this set of assumptions, FCS have to ask themselves, "What good is consumption if the commons is compromised?" After all, the term common good refers to the whole of humanity, not to a privileged few. Is not the universal common good violated if there are places anywhere in the world where basic needs are not met, or if rights and dignity are not respected (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996)? These violations will continue until people begin to realize that physical well-being and worldly possessions do *not* constitute the greatest good or highest value in their life. People need a way to re-imagine consumption so they can break free of the market, consumer culture, rooted in the ideology of individualism. Instead of seeing consumption as an activity done without thinking, they need a way to reframe it as a complex, emergent activity. This rather than a simple, static, individual action that is disconnected from anything and anyone, except themselves.

This fresh twist on consumption entails a new-found respect for accountability and responsibility couched in concepts from the new sciences of quantum physics, chaos theory and living systems theory, namely: patterns, complexity and emergence (Wheatley, 1999). This brief discussion cannot begin to do justice to such rich concepts. But, it does serve to introduce them to FCS professional discourse.

Patterns

Patterns are conventionally understood to be activities done without thinking. A new notion of a pattern is tendered for FCS's consideration, one that views it as a template that helps people find similarities and make connections between things they would not normally connect (McGregor, 2006b). One example of this reframing of consumption, of making connections between dissimilar ideas, is the notion that consumer rights and responsibilities are linked to human rights and responsibilities (McGregor (2003b). Consider that people cannot exercise their consumer rights if their human rights are not in place. How can people form consumer groups and advocate for their rights if it is illegal to associate in groups in public, and if they cannot vote? How can people become educated consumers if they are illiterate due to a lack of access to education? Also, responsible consumer behavior is tantamount to being a responsible human. Consumers acting in solidarity, with a focus on ecological integrity and an informed consumer citizenry (responsible consumers) are simply part of being responsible to each other and the earth.

Perceiving consumption patterns and activities through these lenses releases the potential for FCS to enhance the human condition because these patterns of consuming focus on justice, security, peace, non-violence, sustainability, equality, freedom and prosperity, opportunities, potential, and rights with accountability. These virtues or values comprise the underpinnings of a healthy commons that can support the good of everyone, and augment everyone's human condition (Kaul, Grunberg & Stern, 1999). It is an exciting way for FCS to reframe their approach to helping people augment their quality of life while respecting the shared commons.

Complexity and Emergence

To further develop the idea that the human condition and the commons are inexplicably shaped by consumption and vice-versa, two other concepts from the new sciences apply: complexity and emergence. FCS are familiar with working on complicated, perennial problems. But, there is a difference between a complicated situation and a complex situation. The former is hard to solve because it is intricate and detailed. FCS have historically helped consumers solve complicated problems by informing their decision making process to purchase goods and services. A constellation of academic disciplines has emerged around this phenomenon - marketing, advertising, consumer studies and consumer behaviour. A complex problem has the additional feature of *emergence*, the process of deriving new and coherent structures, patterns, and properties, which begin to appear as a result of the interaction inherent in the web of relationships between people in the world's commons.

This notion of what constitutes a problem is very different from the traditional FCS understanding. Imagine how different consumption could be if FCS helped consumer citizens expect new insights into the human condition to materialize as a result of insights gained through the global and personal dynamic inherent in purchasing a product. They would expect more than one person to be affected by their purchase, rather than assuming they are acting in isolation. For example, a T-shirt purchased on a Ft. Lauderdale street in Florida could be made from cotton grown in Texas, then used to make cloth. A retailer might commission an order for T-shirts that are then made using that cloth in a factory in Shanghai, China. The t-shirt wings its way back to the United States' market where it is bought and printed by someone in Miami and sold at a market in Ft. Lauderdale. It might eventually make its way to goodwill

where it ends up in the used garment market in Tanzania, Africa (Rivoli, 2005). Dynamic, emergent complexity in action. Isolated consumption becomes a thing of the past. Relationships become everything.

Indeed, consumers would expect a set of constantly adapting relationships to lie at the heart of their consumption activities rather than seeing themselves acting in isolation (McGregor, 2006a, b). An awareness of the connections inherent in the journey of a t-shirt, for example, positions FCS to be cognizant of the relationship with commodity producers, policy makers, retailers, manufacturers, laborers, entrepreneurs, charity and civil society organizations and other members of the commodity chain. Viewing consumption through the lens of complex emergence enables FCS to consider that any change in the actions of any of these interconnected players will impact others in the network. From this perspective, FCS will find it hard to view consumption as an isolated, individual activity anymore. With these insights, FCS could ensure that people become more predisposed to consume with the health of the commons in mind, such that people's daily human condition leads to a higher quality of life at sustainable costs.

Discussion

This paper was designed to encourage FCS to reframe their practice so they can help consumers pry open their doors of perception on the world. From the approach explored in this discussion, FCS gain another way to help people catch a glimpse of the connections between their consuming patterns and the integrity of the common good such that the human condition improves. There will be resistance. People have a vested interest in keeping these doors closed, because images of a different future, one where they are connected to other humans, would mean massive changes in their consumer behaviour. Peeking through those partially opened doors onto the commons means experiencing the unfamiliar (uncomfortable) notion that individual consuming habits are leaving a profound, deep, lasting impact on the human condition of all citizens of the world, other species and on the planet. This insight need not be fatalistic, however. No one purposely sets out to harm others. If consumers undertake these actions without the intention to do harm, and yet they harm anyway, it means that their actions are imbedded in how they do things and see themselves in the world, as opposed to being something that they *want* to do. And, that suggests that it can be reversed through a change in world view (Hawken, 1994). FCS can have a role to play in this paradigm shift (McGregor 2006b).

Also, FCS are not immune to this angst because they, too, are consumers. But, *they are also professionals* influenced by a mission to improve the quality of life of individuals, families and communities. From this ethical standpoint, doesn't FCS have a responsibility to concern itself with engaging consumers' moral consciousness so everyone can begin to bear this burden, so we can begin the slow journey away from selfish, isolated consumption toward mutually inclusive, ethical consumption (Harrison, Newholm & Shaw, 2005; McGregor, 2005, 2006c)? This work may be easier than we think. Dressel (2006) claims that a growing number of Americans are rediscovering that the real meaning of *the good life* does not come from things they can buy but from what they can *feel*. The billions of people laboring in "developing countries" to make the goods and services consumed in the consumer society are also becoming more optimistic. They now call themselves Majority World citizens, which makes Northern consumers the Minority (McGregor, 2006a). This is a powerful reframing that FCS might consider. From this stance, FCS can shift paradigms and view

the people of the commons jointly working to redress the gross injustices of a violent, entitlement-focused, consumer life style (McGregor, 2003a; 2006a, b).

Conclusion

It cannot be disputed; the universal commons should benefit everyone. But, it can only do this if it is nurtured and tended by everyone. Right now, Northern consumption patterns are trampling the fresh grass of the commons, leaving too many people stranded on the margins, with little recourse for potential and growth. Even those doing the trampling can be considered as oppressed by the system, slave to the market ideology (McGregor, 2003a). FCS can use the power gained from viewing the human condition and the common good as shaped by emergent and complex consumption patterns. It is a way for us to focus on the disparity that currently exists among individuals, families and the broader community, vis-a-vis production and consumption in the global economy, and on the potential for change.

Better yet, and on ending on an optimistic note, embracing a professional stance of viewing consumption through the lens of justice, freedom, rights with accountability, peace, non-violence and equality is an influential step forward. It is a position from which FCS can gain deeper understandings of the array of factors that impact the balanced sharing of power, opportunity and resources. It gives them a professional edge. Being on the vanguard of change is an exhilarating place to practice. It provides opportunities to contribute to the transformation of the universal commons, and the daily living conditions of humanity, so small feat but a compelling ambition, nonetheless.

As noted at the beginning, we can anticipate our instinctive cynicism, skepticism and innate need to protect ourselves from change and ambiguity. Then, we can draw strength from knowing that we are connected to each other and the world. We can remain open to the possibilities of practicing in ways that yield a better accounting of rising costs and quality of life, our *raison d'être*. Each and every FCS has a part to play in this positive change. Each of us has something to contribute and more to learn. Consider the following ideas for future action:

- Form a new AAFCS professional community of practice around the question of “What would it take to be a functioning consumer for the common good?”
- Create venues through which FCS can share stories of practice or community work shaped through the lense of reframing consumerism to create a healthy commons.
- Join like minded civil society organizations and social movements to gain an array of perspectives and ways of working for rights, justice, equality and peaceful consumption.
- Organize professional development sessions or dialogue circles at professional meetings to encourage and foster profession wide discourse and reflection on this topic.
- Become familiar with the principles and theories of global education, consumer citizenship education, global citizenship education as well as peace education.
- Network with aligned fields of study and engage in scholarly inquiry that crosses disciplinary boundaries.
- Truly engage in integrative, holistic and integral (expect creative tension) practice by purposely weaving disparate ideas into new wholes and connections. Then, use the intellectual insights gained from this inter and transdisciplinary work to

practice differently, with the intent to consciously form links between consumerism, the common good and the human condition.

Ask yourself, “Are you not part of the deeper reality of human existence?” Your answer informs the next steps that you take.

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