Poverty in Consumer Culture: Towards a Transformative Social Representation

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Poverty in Consumer Culture: Towards a Transformative Social Representation

Abstract

In this paper we consider the representations of poverty within consumer culture. We focus on four main themes – social exclusion, vulnerability, pleasure and contentment - that capture some of the associations that contemporary understandings have made with poverty. For each theme, we consider the portrayals of poverty from the perspective of key agents (such as marketers, media, politicians) and then relate this to more emic representations of poverty by drawing on a range of contemporary poverty alleviating projects from around the world. We conclude with a set of guidelines for relevant stakeholders to bear in mind when elaborating their representations of poverty. These guidelines may act as a platform to transform marginalising representations of poverty into more empowering representations.

Summary statement of contribution

We have highlighted the relevance of Social Representation Theory to the field of Transformative Consumer Research. The transformative potential of representations is that they could be used in the service of transformative goals to reframe perceptions of poverty through more realistic and complex representations. Our analysis of a selection of transformative projects leads us to a more nuanced understanding of poverty, and a proposal for more transformative discourse around poverty.

Keywords

Poverty, Representation, Consumer Culture, Transformative consumer research

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Introduction

> *"The poor will be always with us, but what it means to be poor depends on the kind of 'us' they are with…It is one thing to be poor in a society of producers and universal employment; it is quite a different thing to be poor in a society of consumers, in which life-projects are built around consumer choice rather than work, professional skills, or jobs. If 'being poor' once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer"* (Bauman, 2005, p. 1).

Bauman's observations remind us that poverty should be understood as a dynamic concept that is considered relative to the societal norms and customs of a given society. Our emphasis in this paper is primarily on low-income consumers and well-being in consumer culture; thus we are not referring to those living on less than two dollars a day in bottom of the pyramid and subsistence marketplaces (Prahalad, 2006, Viswanathan and Rosa, 2010) but to those who experience poverty within societies where consumption has a strong ideological hold. The paradox of poverty within the midst of affluence is not new but has become more widespread with the recent global economic downturn. The diversity of poverty experiences is greater than ever before. For example, alongside more traditional perspectives that focus on those experiencing homelessness (Hill, 1991; Barrios et al., 2012) and unemployment (Elliott, 1995), recent research has also considered the nouveaux pauvres (middle-class consumers whose socio and cultural capital has decreased) (Ulver-Sneistrup and Ostberg, 2011) and the working poor, people who work and yet "fail to pull above the poverty line or struggle to make ends meet" (Newman 2009, p. xi).

Being poor does not obviate socio-cultural aspirations to consume. Arguing that there has been a shift from a production-orientation to a consumption-focus, Bauman theorises that people living in poverty feel socially excluded and stigmatised in the marketplace. Labelled as "blemished, defective, faulty, and deficient-in other words, inadequate consumer manquees or flawed consumers," the poor are stigmatised due to their lack of participation into "socially relevant" consumption practices (Bauman 2005, p. 38). In a consumer society, "normal life" is structured around consumption. The "bonds of consumption" are considered to be the most significant links that unify people; good consumers are perceived as respected, hard-working, and aspiring members of the contemporary consumer society (Bauman 2000). From this perspective, poverty is not solely focused on economic and material shortage of resources but involves a lack of socio-culturally perceived necessities (Bauman 2000). Hence, poverty becomes a lack of "consumer adequacy," defined as "the continuous availability of a bundle of goods and services that are necessary for survival as well as the attainment of basic human dignity and self-determination" (Hill 2002a, p. 20).

Blocker et al. (2013) highlight the importance of fostering ways in which the poor are able to engage with social and marketplace institutions. Central to this idea is a need to understand the experiences of those living in poverty (Tuason, 2013). Yet, another important aspect of understanding the ways that poor people engage with institutions is to have a deeper appreciation of social representations of poverty, and to understand the meanings associated with poverty. In this paper we unpack social representations of poverty, focusing on the key dimensions of social exclusion and vulnerability, in contrast with the need for contentment and pleasure in daily lives. Social representations theory (SRT) has attracted the attention of social psychology researchers working in a range of contexts that are relevant to Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) such as health and illness (Jovchelovitch and Gervais, 1999) and ethnic identity (Howarth, 2004). However, within marketing and

consumer research studies, the application of SRT has been more limited and confined to the examination of cultural differences (Stewart and Lacassagne, 2005) and an aid to managerial decision making (Penz and Sinkovics, 2013). In this paper, we argue that there is significant potential to adopt SRT for poverty-related research as a means of identifying and challenging dominant representations that stigmatise those experiencing poverty. We start by providing an overview of SRT, where we consider definitions and some of the effects of social representations, and discuss some agents of social representations. We then go on to discuss how social representations have dominated discourses around poverty. By considering the portrayals of poverty from the perspective of key agents (such as media, marketers, politicians) and then relating this to more emic representations of poverty (that is, from the perspectives of poor people themselves) we develop a set of guidelines for relevant stakeholders (marketers, media, politicians or policy makers) to bear in mind when elaborating their representations of poverty. These guidelines may act as a platform to transform marginalising representations of poverty into more empowering representations.

Social Representations Theory

Definition and effects of social representations

Social representations offer us a way of making sense of our world (Jodelet, 1991, Joffe, 1998). A social representation is the set of thoughts and feelings expressed by members of a community, through talk and overt action, which constitutes an object for a social group (Wagner, et al, 1999; Moscovici, 1984). Jodelet (1991) defines social representation as "images that condense manifold meanings that allow people to interpret what is happening; categories which serve to classify circumstances, phenomena and individuals with whom we deal, theories which permit us to establish facts about them". An important aspect of SRT is that it is concerned with consensual understandings, and we follow Moscovici (1984, p. 24)

who suggests that “the purpose of all representations is to make the unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar”. SRT therefore involves the transformation of expert knowledge (often unfamiliar to lay people) into common sense, and familiar, ideas (Joffe, 1998, p. 22). Social representations are shaped through interactions, and generated through the processes of anchoring (the early stage of the unfamiliar being anchored in more conventional and familiar terms) and objectification (the mechanism by which the socially represented knowledge attains its specific form) (Moscovici 1988; Wagner et al, 1999).

The effects of social representations are far-reaching in the sense that the representations become embedded in daily practices or, as Moscovici (1988, p. 216) put it, they are “integrated into everyday ways of doing things.” Through Howarth’s (2004, 2006) work on young Black school pupils, we learn that social representations are institutionalised, and these representations inform the realities people experience. The multiple representations of themselves that Howarth’s pupils described guide them in their everyday actions and behaviours, as they enact expected (or not) versions of themselves.

One aspect of SRT that is particularly relevant to TCR is how it offers categories which are used to classify individuals, and to compare and objectify them (Moscovici, 1988, Jodelet, 1991). If representations are stigmatising they can have substantial social and psychological consequences (Howarth et al. 2004). At a social level, stigmatising representations often centre on a distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’ (Link and Phelan, 2001) which can impact social interactions and create barriers to social inclusion. Psychologically, social representations can influence the development of sense of self and in turn, feelings of well-being.

Dialogue and argumentation are central to the development of social representations within a community, and thus the political effects of SRT emerge in the sense that these representations come to inform the politics of the everyday, as well as legal, institutional and

policy debates (Howarth et al, forthcoming 2014). Social representations come to represent a particular social perspective (Moscovici, 1998), and in this way, are a critically important tool in the development of political arguments, facilitating the anchoring of particular versions of social reality. In economically diverse communities, as evident in many developed countries, these social representations can have the effect of making a particular version of the unfamiliar (say, the experience of poverty), familiar to others in the community. Social representations have a political effect in aiding construction of realities that support or contest social relations (Howarth, 2004). This in turn can have the economic effect of impacting on economic policy and systems of inclusion, exclusion and power within a community.

Agents of social representations

Burr (2003, p. 5) recognises that "our constructions of the world are bound up with power relations" and consequently various experts act as agents of social representations. The result is that knowledge acquires a moral dimension "which regulates what is to be regarded as acceptable or unacceptable in a society" (Joffe, 1998, p. 24). As discussed already, politics and politicians have a role to play in the development of social representations, which are essentially a form of political project informed by the interests, goals and activities of the groups that produce them (Howarth et al, 2014). The mass media is regarded as one of the main vehicles for transmitting knowledge and shaping our cultural frameworks (Jansson, 2002; Kendall, 2005). As Giroux and Pollock (2010, p. 2) contend, media culture "has become the primary educational force in regulating meanings, values, and tastes that legitimate particular subject positions." This was demonstrated in Smith & Joffe's (2013) study of the general public's common sense understanding of global warming, where they showed that the public's initial associations and representations of global warming mirrored visual media representations of the issues.

Markets are increasingly viewed as social constructions that are "fundamental locations for the expression and production of cultural groups and social relations" (Peñaloza and Venkatesh, 2006, p. 312). Studies have focused on the ways that aspects of marketing practice can represent consumers through various media (Cayla & Peñaloza, 2006; Ting and Chee, 2013). For example, Zwick and Dholakia (2004) explore the role of database technology in the constitution and representation of consumers and suggest that within the digital marketspace consumer identity is authored by the owners of database technologies, not by the consumer him/herself.

Finally, we consider the potential of agency in contesting dominant social representations. The knowledge of so-called experts is not simply passively accepted; rather people, particularly those in stigmatised groups, can "actively forge their own representations" (Joffe, 1998, p. 24). In this paper we are concerned with social representations of poverty and argue that the ways in which media, marketing and politicians represent poverty, and how this reflects community and lay understandings of poverty, are important to consider.

Social representations of the key dimensions of poverty

> "*The focus is more on poverty produces crime, poverty produces depressed people, poverty produces uneducated people, poverty produces second rate people. Not why are people poor? How can people stop being poor? No, I think they just focus on the ugliness of it.*" http://www.jrf.org.uk/film/reporting-poverty-poverty-and-media-overview-clip

The above extract are the words of someone experiencing poverty, taken from a Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) production and demonstrating some kind of resistance to

the dominant portrayal of poverty in the media. The social representation of poverty in the JRF quote emphasises the marginalised and excluded nature of poverty (*poverty produces uneducated people….second rate people*), where the state of living in poverty makes people vulnerable to assumptions (*poverty produces crime)* and accusations of not being worthy of having pleasure or contentment in their lives (*poverty produces depressed people … focus on the ugliness of it*). The central tension evident here (poor people are vulnerable, excluded from society, not worthy of pleasure and contentment) leads us to question social representations of poverty in relation to each of these aspects. The resistance expressed by the speaker (*Not why are people poor? How can people stop being poor?)* implies a desire from those living in poverty for more practical engagement, linked to more accurate representations of lived experience, in order to transform their lives out of poverty.

The opening quote acts as a stimulus to challenge contemporary understandings of dominant representations of poverty to develop a more transformative social representation of poverty. In the following sections, we take these four themes – social exclusion, vulnerability, pleasure, contentment - that capture some of the associations that contemporary understandings have made with poverty. For each we provide a clear definition of the term in the poverty context, we review what SRT has documented so far and key agents affecting discourses around this theme. We then provide examples of an emic view of this theme. These poverty alleviating projects from around the world focus on a range of contexts, but all are concerned with issues around representation of people living in poverty, an appreciation of the real world experiences and tensions they face, and working towards building their resources (often social resources) to improve their lives.

Social Exclusion

A relatively recent concept that has gained popularity since 1970s, social exclusion broadly refers to a "rupture of social bonds" (O'Brien et al. 2009). More specifically, social exclusion encompasses those situations in which "certain members of a society are, or become, separated from much that comprises the normal "round" of living and working within that society" (Philo, 2000, p. 751). For individuals and communities to be considered 'excluded,' they must be separated from multiple social domains such as the labor market, marketplace, communal life, and democratic/civic arena (Richardson and Le Grand, 1999; Sen, 2000). As it relates to the discourse on poverty, this holistic look at social exclusion underlines the multidimensional and complex nature of poverty; much impoverished living is caused by intertwined social, relational, and structural disadvantages that are triggered by being excluded from the necessary social circles, networks, and support communities (Hill and Stephens, 1997; Jennings, 1999; Hill, 2001).

Representations of poverty generally lean towards two extremes: *blaming the victim* vs. *blaming the system* perspectives (Jennings, 1999; Rank, 2004), highlighting the co-existence of multiple, and at times, conflicting depictions of reality (Jodelet, 1991). Yet, traditionally, social representations of poverty have leaned towards a negative depiction, particularly within a wider socio-cultural context of abundance. The media representations around poverty are powerful, reflecting the moral positions about good or correct ways to live (Clawson and Trice, 2000). For example, in popular culture media such as TV shows (e.g. *Cops* and *My Name is Earl*) and movies (e.g. *Wrestler* (2008) and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004)), mobile home parks have been depicted as undesirable, substandard dwelling communities that are home to people with low moral standards. Media portrayals are "often out of context, with no consideration of the underlying social and economic factors that work to generate and reproduce poverty over time" (Mooney, 2011, p.7). Likewise, the cultural

approach to poverty (Lewis, 1959, 1970) portrays a rather negative account of impoverished conditions and attributes poverty to individual failings while overlooking the role of socio-structural dynamics in social exclusion. For example, people in poverty are usually represented as present-oriented, living one day at a time with little planning to the future, and always procrastinating decisions that could lead them to a better-off economic situation. As Mooney (2009, p 447) comments there, "is a thinly disguised culture of poverty argument that people experiencing poverty are lacking in the capacity to escape poverty, gripped by fatalism and apathy". In this research tradition, both emic and etic accounts of poverty implicitly create a rigid categorization of impoverished individuals and communities as a generational and, and often times, a deviant subculture (Lewis, 1970). Hence, the only way to alleviate poverty is through making sure that impoverished consumers adhere to the values and behaviors of the non-poor. For example, the job component of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was designed to offer the poor youth basic education and marketable skills to secure employment. However, it was based on a rigid cultural perspective stating that the youth had to be removed from their 'vicious environment' for the training program to be successful (Waxman, 1983).

Such negative and degrading representations of impoverished lives perpetuate social stigmatization and might maintain and even legitimize social exclusion (Howarth, 2006). A more critical and transformative perspective on how diverse representations of poverty can impact on social exclusion should explore the role of multiple social agents in both shaping and negotiating experiences of *excluding* and *being excluded*. Despite the growing interest in the role of community organizations, non-profits, and other types of social networks in conveying diverse social representations and the related dynamics of exclusion, consumer research investigating the role of these stakeholders is still scant (see, for exceptions, Prahalad, 2006; Santos and Laczniak, 2009; Talukdar, Gulyani, and Salmen, 2005;

Viswanathan and Rosa, 2010). We believe there are some critical questions that need to be addressed for a transformative assessment of social exclusion. How do multiple and, at times, conflictual representations of poverty impact experiences of social exclusion? How do different forms of exclusion contribute to and extend our understanding of social representations? Does an analysis of such different types of exclusion (e.g., exclusion from the labor market, marketplace, civic and political arena, and other social circles) help in untangling underlying meanings of multiple social representations of poverty? Does it enrich our thinking on transformative poverty research and social action in alleviating poverty?

An emic approach to social exclusion might help explore the diversity and richness of disadvantage faced by impoverished people. As an example, the distinction between the "constitutive relevance of social exclusion" and "instrumental relevance of social exclusion" (Sen, 2000) is one noteworthy dimension of impoverished living. A form of social exclusion is considered to be *constitutively relevant* if it represents a loss on its own that directly impoverishes consumers' lives such as being unemployed and not having any other source of income. In contrast, *instrumentally relevant* deprivations may not be impoverishing in themselves but can lead to other disadvantages as in the case of a lack of access to a fair credit market exacerbating income poverty. Studies have shown evidence of how the poor are exposed to high rates of pay-day loans and credit cards (Mendel, 2005). As such, while the extreme poor who experience constitutively relevant forms of social exclusion may fight for more basic resources such as shelter and food, the marginal poor may seek opportunities that provide cultural capital (e.g., education and vocation training) and supplementary income (e.g., financial loans and credit needed for an entrepreneurial endeavor). Consequently, remedies for alleviating social exclusion vary. For example, while government-based programs might offer solutions for the extreme poor (Kotler, Roberto, and Leisner, 2006),

micro-credit opportunities such as the programs offered by the Grameen Bank might help the marginal poor to secure the means for a more stable living.

Furthermore, responses to social exclusion vary and the resources people bring to manage exclusion are diverse and rich, ranging from getting-by strategies such as minimizing expenditures (Hill, 2001; Lister, 2004; Hill and Gaines, 2007) to more active and organized forms of resistance as in the case of Appalachian coal miners protesting their working conditions (Gaventa, 1980). Subscribing to the negative representations of poverty and the moral underclass discourse (Levitas, 1998), other impoverished people choose to engage in more passive psychological tactics. Chase and Walker's (2012) work on poverty-induced shame suggested that families experiencing poverty are very aware of media stereotypes that emphasise individual rather than structural causes of poverty. Indeed such representations are so dominant that Chase and Walker's (2012, p.12) participants engage in a form of "projected shaming" to distinguish and distance themselves from others who they imagined to be further down the social hierarchy, thereby transferring shame from themselves to others. Despite the growing consumer research on coping with social exclusion, an implicit assumption that the poor are less creative and more passive than middle-class consumers still exists (Henry, 2005). Thus, much consumer research on poverty tends to highlight the daily struggle for basic necessities; emic accounts that investigate more active, creative, and empowered ways of managing exclusion are needed to better understand impoverished lives.

An effective example is The World Bank's ethnographic study (*The Voices of the Poor*) which relies on qualitative and participatory methodologies and combines emic accounts of poverty through fieldwork conducted in more than 60 countries. It provides realistic and comprehensive emic perspectives on different forms of exclusion, interconnected disadvantages, and various resources used to manage social exclusion. For example, it draws attention to the issues around the working poor and how they are

represented and there is an understanding of the structural causes of and aspects of living in poverty (Rank, 2004; Newman and Chen, 2007).

Another example of an emic representation of exclusion is captured in a recent essay written by Linda Tirado (Tirado, 2013). The essay, that has gone viral, was motivated by Tirado's desire to explain why people experiencing poverty make "terrible decisions":

> "we know that we will never not feel tired. We will never feel hopeful. We will never get a vacation. Ever. We know that the very act of being poor guarantees that we will never not be poor. It doesn't give us much reason to improve ourselves. We don't apply for jobs because we know we can't afford to look nice enough to hold them…… Poverty is bleak and cuts off your long-term brain….We don't plan long-term because if we do we'll just get our hearts broken." (http://killermartinis.kinja.com/why-i-make-terrible-decisions-or-poverty-thoughts-1450123558)

Tirado's essay helps to explain why those experiencing poverty become excluded from "the normal "round" of living and working" (Philo, 2000, p. 751). For example, by explaining that a present orientation is a defence mechanism ("it's certainly self-defeating, but it's safer") that facilitates coping with everyday life, Tirado's words effectively challenge some of the more scathing critiques of consumers' behaviour while in poverty. She therefore adds context to the blaming the victim perspective and in doing so, offers explanation as to why those in poverty have different values and behaviours to the non-poor.

Vulnerability

For those on limited incomes, markets and consumption can become sources of "risk, vulnerability, and social conflict" (Baker and Mason, 2012, p.543). Definitions of consumer vulnerability - often reflected in discourses of poverty - have been conflicted (e.g., Baker,

Gentry and Rittenburg, 2005; Commuri and Ekici 2008). Historically, consumer vulnerability has been based on demographic and socioeconomic variables such as elderly (Benet, Pitts and LaTour, 1993), young (Pechmann et al., 2011; Pechmann, Levine, Loughlin and Leslie, 2005), minority (Sautter and Oretskin, 1997; Smith and Cooper-Martin, 1997) and poor (Andreasen, 1975; Hill, 2001), though empirical evidence does not support such indiscriminate characterizations of vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005; Hamilton and Catterall, 2006; Ringold, 2005). To accommodate these concerns, more recent perspectives account for the complexity of interactions between individuals and social structures that drive vulnerability in the marketplace (Baker 2009; Baker and Mason, 2012; Shultz and Holbrook, 2009).

A SRT approach provokes concern for the ways in which vulnerability is defined, as those who define and represent vulnerability are in positions of power and therefore impact the distribution of social and economic resources (Baker and Mason, 2012). Accompanying this power is the capacity to influence the way in which others interpret those who are often considered vulnerable and therefore their position and treatment in/by society (Clawson and Trice, 2000; Pechmann et al., 2011; Shultz and Holbrook, 2009). There has been little or no marketing scholarship focused on vulnerability with a specifically SRT approach. However, the need for such an approach is highlighted by a recent report on childhood poverty and inequality in the UK which identified the need to overcome a 'them and us society' in order to inform social cohesion (National Children's Bureau, 2013).

The competing definitions of vulnerability (e.g. demographic, environmental, situational or community and context) have important implications (Baker and Mason, 2012). Hancock's (2003) analysis of U.S. Congressional Record transcripts of welfare reform debates demonstrates the cross-party influence of "welfare queen" discourses—highly racialized and gendered discourses linking poverty to moral degeneracy—on political

outcomes. In the UK, political parties of all persuasions have embraced the terminology of 'hard working families,' which links the route out of poverty to employment and individual effort. Tyler (2013) argues that Tony Blair's first speech upon assuming power in 1997, in which he hints at structural influences of poverty but conflates it with individual responsibility, set the tone for the political and media discourse that continues to this present day, a discourse which encourages rather than overcomes the 'them and us' society (National Children's Bureau, 2013). Within this context it is unsurprisingly to hear of the delays in signing up, and employing the governments' welfare programs (Robin and Pavetti 2000). From an emic perspective, studies have evidenced that this delay is caused by two factors: (1) the long process to access these programs conflicts with people's wishful thinking that they will soon get a job, and (2) the stigmatization and further discrimination people experience when entering in such programs (Jarrett 2006). Politically, a so-called underclass was differentiated from 'hard working families', and consumers become collectively defined and understood from within broad (income derived) categories. Although poverty is not necessarily seen as individual choice, the route out of poverty is positioned and represented as an individual responsibility.

Other agents contributing to the circulation of prevalent discourses include the media. Documentaries and reality programming representing poverty or the poor—such as *Benefits Street* (UK) and *In Plain Sight* (U.S.)—are known as 'poverty porn', owing to their perceived exploitation of potentially vulnerable people for mass entertainment (Mooney, 2009; Mooney, 2011). Vulnerability becomes understood in terms of individual differences – e.g. *these people are poor because they make misguided consumption decisions* (Ercolani 2014; Gold 2014; Roenigk 2014). This "dismissive distancing of the general public from those living with poverty" (McKendrick et al. 2008, p.36) means that the programme participants' vulnerability becomes, in part, positioned as self-inflicted and interpreted from a moral lens

regarding appropriate consumption and leisure choices. These representations matter because they influence action.

Finally, possibly at odds with prevalent political and media representations of vulnerability are marketplace practices that seek to make money from poorer consumers. Credit and loan companies position their target market as poor, yet deserving, consumers who have the opportunity to make a difference to their lives. Marketing activities downplay the risks, vulnerability and conflicts which the market may entail (Baker and Mason, 2012). For example, some rent-to-own businesses play on sources of vulnerability (e.g. poverty), advertising access to goods through low weekly payments. However, these businesses often levy a "poverty tax," or "a hidden tax paid by the poor because they are poor" (Karger 2007, p. 413; Rivlin 2011) through staggeringly high interest rates. One such company in the UK, BrightHouse, describes its mission as "to provide customers with the means to access household goods and services to improve the quality of their lives" (BrightHouse.co.uk). Yet while positioning vulnerable consumers as deserving and agentic, these discourses are used to detrimental effect. The outcome for many lower income consumers is more debt and increased vulnerability and reliance on external agencies.

At issue in this dialogue about vulnerability is the possibility that experiences of vulnerability influence consumption practices and vice versa (Henry, 2005; Mabughi and Selim, 2006) and that media, policy, and marketplace responses can affect consumer experiences of vulnerability by either facilitating or impeding consumer agency (Baker 2009; Blocker et al. 2011; Coleman 2012). That is, the same systems that are in positions to define poverty and vulnerability, and therefore positions of power, are at risk of contributing to vulnerability by usurping consumer agency.

Baker et al. (2005) emphasise the importance of distinguishing between actual and perceived vulnerability. Positioning consumers as vulnerable has the potential to restrict

agency through ignoring poorer consumers' lived experiences, which may include happiness and fulfilment. On the other hand, some vulnerable consumers do not fit society's views of what it means to be vulnerable – for example the 'working poor' are not acknowledged in many conceptions of poverty (Newman, 2009). Some media representations may start from the position of giving consumers a voice in their own representations, but it is the programme makers (e.g. directors, producers, editors) and news journalists who decide which and how the story is told. Many of these representations are unhelpful because rather than empowering vulnerable consumers, they risk denying their voice. An emic view of vulnerability would engender greater transformative potential.

We briefly summarise two examples of organisations which offer an emic and potentially more transformative approach to understanding vulnerable consumers. Voisin Malin (http://www.voisin-malin.fr/) is a French organisation working in disadvantaged areas. Their central aim is to develop a network of competent neighbours, acting as an interface with new residents to reduce marginalisation and build value for local people. The programme focuses on building social resources, community and access and opportunities for consumers to interact with various social institutions. Rather than assuming poor people are unskilled or incompetent, the organisation acknowledges their potential isolation and accompanying lack of information about rights and opportunities, thus directly tackling the issues that often lead people to be vulnerable in their marketplace dealings.

The Muziq Speaks project, by Action Aid, (http://www.actionaid.org.uk/bollocks-to-poverty/2013/08/22/the-trip-of-a-lifetime-to-the-korogocho-music-project) works with young people in the Korogocho slum in Nairobi. It aims to help develop skills and competences to earn a living through engagement and involvement with the community radio station, Koch FM. In identifying the need to support youths with building skills, competences, confidence and developing job opportunities for young slum-dwellers, the project helps with the

development of cultural capital and the alleviation of the effects of stigma and discrimination attached to slum living.

Having considered how social representations of people living in poverty perpetuate understandings around social exclusion and vulnerability, we now turn our attention to social representations of pleasure and contentment for people in poverty, and thus tackle a central tension around the representation of poor people in society.

Pleasure

Campbell (1987) describes pleasure as the emblematic value of the romantic ethic in the 19th century, driving the emergence of the consumption society. Nowadays, pleasure is embedded in consumption (Carù, Cova and Deruelle, 2006), either linked to hedonic (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) or emotional experiences (Illouz, 2009). These works refer to pleasure as a state of satisfaction of desires and wants, something that all humans are looking for. Following the original thoughts on pleasure by Epicurus (in O'Keefe, 2005), it is therefore defined as a necessary condition to happiness. Yet, broader perspectives on pleasure reveal its ambiguous nature. For example, Bataille (1986) has defined pleasure as a paradox: it incorporates the limits and the extremes of possibilities for people. It provides something in the field of what is possible, yet incorporates knowledge and feelings about the "impossible". The history of pleasure is also highly connected to morality (Foucault, 1990). Judeo-Christian thought has progressively represented pleasure as something inferior to higher values, associated with the weakness of human beings. Although this literature connects pleasure to "extreme" behaviors, the tensions of this "tyranny of pleasure" (Guillebaud, 1999) can be found in most of our consumption, yet in a more vivid way when concerning poor consumers.

Although marketing has not specifically addressed the notion of pleasure through SRT, its use is relevant to highlight how the values and opinions linked to pleasure influence

attitudes and norms about poverty. Indeed, pleasure and poverty often seem antithetic. On the one hand, poor consumers are assumed not to be able to afford and experience pleasure. In a culture which emphasizes pleasure through consumption, poor people are more likely to experience frustration and temptation, as well as feelings of stigmatization and unhappiness from this privation of pleasure (Hill, 2002b, 2007; Hjort and Ekstrom, 2006). On the other hand, when they consume in a way that could be associated with forms of pleasure (and therefore beyond their "basic" needs), they are condemned and perceived as amoral.

This last perspective is not new and has been shaped by various agents. In the industrial society, the working class was perceived by the upper classes as focused on futile pleasures, embodied by drinking habits or high numbers of children (Pierrard, 2005). Current perceptions of how those living in poverty engage in pleasurable activities builds on these ideas, although is now connected to other consumption behaviors and involves a more diverse array of actors. Poor people are often represented as making "pleasurable", and unnecessary, purchases. Even though researchers have shown that these behaviors are a way to cope with stigma (Chin, 2001; Hamilton, 2012), popular representations remain. We demonstrate this through the example of the flat screen television, which is associated with leisure, relaxation and consequently a form of (undeserved) pleasure. A recent French newspaper argued: "*there is limited knowledge about the use of the money [given to people on welfare]. But the social workers are not duped. They know that a part of the money is used to buy flat screen TVs. Or other things…*" (Bonazza, 2013, p.80). Political actors also construct these representations by associating the TV with laziness and undeserved comfort (Roquelle, 2011), while social workers admit having difficulty understanding the budget decisions of poor families which they also attribute to structural conditions: "*Poor people are exposed to the same advertisements, to the same environment than us, so having a job or not doesn't change anything. (…) So yes, sometimes we see new equipment in the houses, new TV, while we know*

their budget. But we can't forbid things to people, it's complicated" (interview with French social worker, Gorge, forthcoming). While the TV provides a good symbol of this moral representation of pleasure, many other consumption objects and behaviors emphasize this same aspect, such as smartphones or branded clothes. Plus, these representations are also constructed and sustained by poor people themselves, in particular to establish distinctions and construct some kind of status legitimacy (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013).

Yet emic perspectives are needed to nuance these traditional representations of poverty and pleasure. Research could question the cultural and social representations of pleasure and consumption, both at a macro level and among poor people. The representation of pleasure certainly varies between contexts, and in the research literature appears mainly in studies in Western contexts, where the pleasure concept is associated with materialism and consumption. New research perspectives could extend the exploration of this notion of pleasure in the context of emerging markets. Other research could study how pleasure is differently experienced among poor people, such as envisioning poverty as a challenge and developing competences in reaction to it (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). An example could be the representation attached to the use of credit by poor people. Often represented as purchasing pleasurable goods, Calder (1999) nuances this account by showing the use of credit also obliges the working class to maintain a stable income to be able to reimburse the credit. Another way of looking at pleasure would be to question the distinction between overwhelming pleasure and controlled pleasure (Bataille, 1986). People in poverty can relate to pleasure but may experience a more constrained or rational sense of pleasure (Free Thinking, 2012).

In this perspective some programs have been driven, to *transform* the representations of pleasure when associated to poverty and resist the construction of stigmatization. Following on with the example of Muziq Speaks discussed above, this campaign is built upon

a deep understanding of a pleasurable activity (in the sense that musical activity relates to enjoyment), but is being mobilised to produce a source of income and living for these people. Recently, the association ATD Fourth World (www.atd-fourthworld.org) has launched a book called *To End With False Ideas On Poor And Poverty* (Tardieu, 2013). In one of the sections, they show that even though poor people have TVs (like anyone), this object has become so affordable, that it is not a relevant economic sign of richness or poverty. They also argue, in line with Stiglitz (2012) that selling the TV would not significantly improve their budget, while owning it provides moments of well-being for people who have a general lack of access to well-being. This kind of perspective has been sustained by concrete actions from some associations fighting poverty such as Secours Populaire (*http://english.secourspopulaire.fr/*). Shifting from the sole alimentary and accommodation focus, this type of association seeks to integrate people into a social life and offers them leisure opportunities (such as vacations, Christmas gifts etc.). Their willingness is to recognize these elements of consumption as enhancing poor people's citizenship and future outlook.

Contentment

Contentment reflects a satisfaction-like emotion with low arousal (Fournier and Mick 1999) and a cognitive component of happiness (Rojas and Veenhoven 2013), whereby humans seeking contentment are desiring favourable comparisons for life-as-it-is versus life-as-they-desire (see Bruni and Porta 2005 for related literature). Beyond assessing gaps in life, contentment also involves a focus on energizing life forces in the face of perceived "lack" in one's life – meaning that contentment may be present or especially sought after in spite of very unhappy circumstances. For these reasons, contentment is generally considered a commendable and praiseworthy state of being sought after by people in any life

circumstance. However, when it comes to life pursuits and circumstances deemed to be unnecessarily stagnant, the label of "being content" can also take on the social connotation of unhealthy acceptance or resignation to a "bad" life situation. Within the context of poverty, there is very little research that directly examines the idea of contentment. That said, studies conducted with vulnerable groups, including homeless, welfare recipients, poor children and their families show that when consumers cannot rise above their circumstances, long term consequences including frustration, humiliation, and inferiority, which collectively refer to "ill-being" are likely to occur (Hill and Stephens, 1997; Hill and Gaines, 2007). Thus, for many experiencing poverty, contentment in life seems out of one's grasp.

Research on contentment making explicit use of a SRT is scant. In fact, the majority of research in the related domain of happiness or quality of life has examined top-down objective determinants of happiness. However, a growing number of studies explore subjectively defined reasons for overall satisfaction with life, and one study adopts an SRT perspective to report on the shared social representations of happiness between men and women (Crossley and Langdridge 2005). As it relates to poverty discourse, people living in subsistence conditions are often socially represented at the extreme poles of (dis)contentment. In particular, media and documentaries conventionally propagate either: (i) images of people in subsistence expressing joy and happiness despite owning almost nothing, e.g., women carrying large jars on their head in the hot sun and yet grinning ear to ear, or alternatively, (ii) people in very a destitute fashion, such as sick and starving children who appear in imminent danger of death. Far fewer representations depict life between these extremes. At their best, these bi-polar social representations may engender admiration and assistance; at their worst, they romanticize the poor's struggle to survive or inspire misguided white-saviour projects. Neither seems to make the "unfamiliar" more "familiar" or reduce social distance. Within developed economies, there appears to be a wider range of social representations of

contentment in poverty. Individuals who live in homeless pathways are often socially represented as failures on the basis of degraded morals and insufficient work ethic. This is especially true for those living in societies where achievement ideology runs quite strong (Macleod 2008). Individuals and families with access to stable shelter and living in a higher economic stratum are often categorized as "the working poor." Such individuals are typically represented as "just barely making it," and "living on thin margins."

In addition to media representations, public policies, assistance programs, and the organizations that coordinate them (whether state-run or non-governmental) are key agents that shape the social reflections of contentment for people living in poverty. Assistance programs are typically designed around filling perceived life gaps that are believed to help individuals living in poverty attain greater contentment e.g., security and psychological peace through housing programs, dignity through employment assistant programs, physical health through food programs. Whereas many programs may provide adequate correspondence with the contentment strivings of those living in poverty, a large percentage of social programs are the object of debate for missing the mark on what individuals in poverty actually need or want.

Moreover, research suggests that certain 'informal' agents can help poor consumers rise above their circumstances. In other words, even though they are classified as poor some consumers are able to receive support/assistance from their social networks, and thus, attain greater contentment in their lives (e.g. Yucel 2012). Furthermore, certain cultural characteristics may serve as additional informal agents. Yucel (2012) identifies religion (i.e. certain religious beliefs and teachings) as an important agent some poor consumers use to feel more content about their lives. In addition, the research notes that relations with certain marketplace agents have bearings on poor consumers' lives. In this context, 'trust' between

poor consumer and marketers itself becomes a critical agent that affects contentment with life (Ekici and Peterson 2009).

An emic perspective on contentment in poverty might open up a much broader and deeper range of desired pathways and outcomes than those prescribed by assistance programs. For example, on the basis of efficient resource allocation and/or enacting policies to ensure sustainable funds through grant renewal, social service organizations create administrative structures to approve of and disburse benefits. Impoverished participants must then "fit" within specified categories defined on in-take surveys, e.g., income levels for food banks or prior substance use for job assistance programs. In many cases, time limits or pre-requisites for obtaining a social benefit may negotiate an individual's relationship toward the organization and desired engagement with its programs. Practically speaking, some level of structure is likely required to run the myriad of social programs in various contexts.

We feel these ambiguities and tensions highlight the need to better understand the resources that people living in poverty draw upon to pursue contentment amidst deprivation. Financial means alone are insufficient in explaining people's perceptions of their subjective well/ill-being. As noted above, certain social and cultural resources and personal characteristics may also play a role. Research, for example, has shown that when low income consumers are able to exert agency, they seem to have a greater power to cope with the consequences of their living conditions (Hill and Stamey, 1990).

The Invisible People is a videoblog with entries of homeless people (from USA, Canada, UK) speaking about their diverse stories and "wishes" in life. The focus is on their experiences of homelessness, gaining shelter/cover; occupying themselves during the day (when not able to access hostels/shelter); issues around accessing benefits/welfare and other services; and safety and health concerns. The Invisible People project embraces social media to facilitate the creation and dissemination of new representations, thereby creating

alternative networks of information flows that challenge dominant codes relating to people in poverty (Hamelink, 1995). The use of media empowers homeless people to tell their stories, challenging and dismantling stereotypical views of homelessness (and what makes them happy/content). This builds awareness with commercial and non-profit organizations, as well as increasing awareness among the general population. Further, telling other people about one's own poverty-related experiences (talking about the challenges of living in poverty) may work as a way of "therapy" which may, in term, improve their subjective well-being.

The Voisin Malin project discussed above utilizes the power of social capital to activate feelings of contentment. Those who are engaged in neighborly relations (and therefore less marginalized) are more likely to feel content. This is important because it challenges the idea that important resources are only explicitly linked to money. Drawing on the cultural resource-based theory of the consumer, Arnould, Price and Malshe (2006) suggest that consumers may indeed use operant or more intangible resources within the marketplace. Social capital, therefore, is a resource for poor consumers to draw on to feel more content about their lives.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have introduced SRT, which we believe makes an important contribution to the field of TCR. In his writing on the science of social psychology, Moscovici (1972, p. 23) asks: "*We must ask what is the aim of the scientific community. Is it to support or to criticize the social order? Is it to consolidate it or transform it*?" These questions are equally relevant to transformative consumer researchers interested in representations of poverty. The transformative potential of representations is that they could be used in the service of transformative goals to reframe one-dimensional perceptions of

poverty. Our analysis of a selection of transformative projects leads us to a more nuanced understanding of poverty, and a proposal for more transformative discourse that deconstructs the stigma around poverty (See Table 1).

Table 1: Unpacking a Transformative Social Representation of Poverty

Dominant discourse		*Transformative discourse*
Moral underclass discourse (Levitas, 1998) that emphasises individual rather than structural causes of poverty. The poor are less creative and more passive that middle-class consumer (Henry, 2005).	**Social Exclusion**	A social justice perspective acknowledges that a range of institutional and market forces can contribute to poverty. This recognises the importance of context and diversity of the poverty experience. Emphasises more active, creative and empowered ways of managing exclusion.
Vulnerable consumers are collectively defined and understood from within broad (income) categories, which encourages a "them and us" society. Vulnerable consumers are often denied agency by marketplace, media and policy systems. Disempowering of vulnerable consumers through a denial of their voices.	**Vulnerability**	Considers the fluidity of vulnerability and acknowledges the role of resources, competences and knowledge in alleviating vulnerability. Emphasis on giving vulnerable consumers their own voice, and appreciation of the myriad experiences of vulnerability and dangers of stereotyping in the positioning of vulnerable consumers.
Denial of pleasure: Utilitarian aspect - lack of money (Hill, 2001). Moralistic aspect - excessive and aspirational consumption (Chin, 2001).	**Pleasure**	Acceptance of pleasure: Recognition of right to access pleasure in line with cultural and social norms. Pleasure is experienced differently by those in poverty and may be more controlled and constrained.
Poverty often associated with ill-being and contentment presented as out of reach. Objective, top-down determinants of contentment misconstrue what individuals in poverty need or want.	**Contentment**	Financial means alone are insufficient in explaining well/ill-being, e.g. social engagement may facilitate contentment. Subjective well-being associated with a broader range of pathways and outcomes.

This more transformative discourse leads us towards a set of guidelines for stakeholders in marketing and policy contexts who are working with poverty populations, to ensure they are developing empowering, rather than marginalising, representations.

Representations should not depict those in poverty as a homogenous group: The experience of poverty in consumer culture is manifested in a range of different contexts:

family and individual accounts of poverty; rural and urban poverty; enduring and transient poverty; the working poor and the unemployed; hidden poverty and more visible instances of poverty. This confirms that poverty is multidimensional and far-reaching. However dominant social representations of poverty tend to largely portray people living in poverty as a homogeneous group. The result is that those living in poverty are reported as a social problem leading to exclusion and stigmatisation.

The importance of context: SRT focuses on "group-based, symbolic understandings and communications" (Joffe, 2002, p. 560). This resonates with the identification of the sociocultural context as a core quality of TCR (Mick et al., 2011). The transformative examples we discuss from a range of cultures acknowledge that contextual dimensions impact upon beliefs and practices, and in turn, well-being.

The need for emic representations of poverty: SRT recognises that people can be active in changing and fashioning their own representations (Joffe, 1998); in particular they may contest representations that stigmatise in order to defend their identity position (Howarth et al., 2004). Taking a social constructionist approach allows us to move beyond the status quo to critique social structures that maintain inequality and discrimination. SRT therefore opens the door for an examination of power and resistance (Howarth, 2006). From a research perspective, this requires that researchers obtain a level of engagement with the researched community that positions them as "learners in a new cultural environment" to allow them "to understand the life-worlds of participants from their culturally embedded perspectives" (Howarth et al. 2004, p. 239).

Recognition of the dynamic nature of social representations: The notion of resistance as a dynamic approach is important, as it recognises the creative potential and unpredictability of the consumer in their ability to challenge poverty and its representations in imaginative ways.

This supports our claim that SRT is relevant to the study of social change, including changes in public opinion (Farr, 1993).

This is where we appreciate the transformative potential of SRT. Despite the extent of poverty around the world, for many it remains "unfamiliar" and more transformative representations could make poverty more 'familiar', thereby reducing perceptions of difference and ultimately improving well-being for those who are stigmatised by society at large. By bringing these issues to the forefront, we are hoping to provoke change in those representations that lead to social exclusion, thereby affecting how people in poverty both are viewed and view themselves.

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