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## **Fair is good but what is fair? Discursive negotiations of justice in a community of foodsharing**

### **Abstract**

By means of an ethnographic approach, this research advances understanding of ideology, justice and consumer behavior in a food sharing context. In contrast to capitalist market exchanges, which are defined by clear rules and principles of reciprocity, the redistribution of goods in a “sharing” context is in many cases less institutionalized and thus open to contestation. We map out the interplay of different and partly contradicting ideologies in a sharing community and explain how each ideology is translated into narratives regarding the redistribution of goods. We discuss our findings in terms of their implications for the understanding of the co-constitutive nature of ideologies and their alignment.

**Keywords:** *Ideology, Fairness / Justice, Sharing, Ethnography*

**Track:** *Consumer behavior*

*“Justice is the first virtue of social institution as truth is of systems of thoughts”*  
(Rawls, 2009, p.3)

## **1. Need for study**

Ideologies and respective concepts of justice underlie and underpin most structures, exchanges, interactions, institutions and consumer behavior (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Üstüner & Holt, 2007). While different notions of justice and their related ideologies have mainly been researched in the context of the economics of common goods (Ostrom, 1990), tax rates (Adhikari, Derashid, & Zhang, 2006) or the allocation of salaries (Finn & Lee, 1972), they have found little scholarly attention in studies of consumer behavior. Prototypical commodity exchanges that have long been at the center of interest in consumer research are mostly based on explicit contracts of exchange that imply concrete tit-for-tat reciprocities between buyer and seller.

Gift-exchanges, sharing and alternative markets as they can be observed within the “new sharing economy” (Botsman & Rogers, 2011) are however driven by less explicit reciprocal principles and are thus open to contestation over principles of fair distribution.

In popular media but also in academic accounts, sharing is displayed as a panacea in a hyper consumerist world: It is not only seen as pro-social (Belk, 2010), but moreover associated with an environmentally friendly lifestyle (Botsman & Rogers, 2011) that fosters an efficient use of existing resources. From this perspective on sharing, the ideals of pro-sociality and sustainability go hand in hand. In addition to ideals of sustainability and pro-sociality, sharing also accommodates capitalist ideals. Indeed, the “new sharing economy” has brought forward new business models (car-sharing, peer-to-peer rental) that outperform traditional businesses through their efficiency and profit margins.

Given the co-existence of pro-social, environmental, and capitalist ideals in the concept of sharing, there is reason to challenge their compatibility with regard to underlying principles of justice. The present research aims to explore how understandings of fair sharing are negotiated and formed through the interplay of conflicting ideologies within an emergent foodsharing community in Western Europe. Based on an ethnography including participant observation, in-depth interviews and the analysis of online data, we research how groups of individuals dynamically form, communicate, negotiate, and embrace tensions that emerge from divergent ideologies and respective understandings of justice.

## **2. Conceptual Background: Ideologies in the context of sharing**

We start by reviewing the larger cultural context in which the foodsharing community as our research context is embedded. Seen from such “context-in context” perspective (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011), the interests of different actors that strive for negotiation, dominance and resolution in a community are object to the influences of broader socio-cultural currents that prevail in the respective environment. In our cultural analysis of sharing in Western industrialized nations, we review three concrete ideologies (pro-social, ecological and capitalist) that have been found to guide perceptions of sharing in this particular context and outline how each of them is connected to certain principles of justice.

### *2.1 Prosocial Ideology*

The idea of the modern social welfare state that guides distribution of resources in many developed nations can be seen as an institutionalization of the pro-social ideal of Robin Hood's "taking from the rich and giving to the poor". At the heart of this ideology is the *need principle of justice* according to which individuals who are in greatest need should be provided with the resources required to meet those needs, independently of their actual input (Forsyth, 2006). Such pro-social ideas of justice are reflected by economic welfare state systems, but also by institutions such as food banks, charities, soup kitchens, homeless shelters or policy initiatives aimed at diminishing the experienced poverty trap (Sachs, 2006).

According to Belk (2010), the prototype of sharing is sharing within the family in which the parents and hence the economically and physically better equipped parties within this social group share their resources with their children as individuals in need without expectations of concrete reciprocal expectations (Belk, 2010).

## 2.2 Ecology Ideology

Said to foster an efficient use of resources and hence to help providing a livable environment for future generations (Belk, 2010; Botsman & Rogers, 2011; Gansky, 2010), sharing also has the image of being an environmentally friendly consumption behavior. Common perceptions of sharing among scholars and the public link it to preserving the environment and efficiently governing common resources (Ostrom, 1990), a political dimension that goes beyond its theoretical conceptualization as alternative mode of good circulation. Sharing for a sustainable future operates on the underlying *justice principle of equality*. Hereby, no dominance or preference is granted to a certain group, but the aim of redistribution is the preservation of resources for everyone.

Sustainable consumption ideals are reflected, for instance, in community-supported agriculture movements (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007), recycling efforts (Biswas et al., 2000), or second-hand stores (Lastovicka & Fernandez, 2005).

## 2.3 Capitalist Ideology

Despite postmodernist drivers such as pro-social and ecological considerations, sharing is not devoid of capitalist ideology. The main actors in the "new sharing economy" have still been brought up in a capitalist society and are coined by its value system and contractual exchange principles. The capitalist ideology operates on an *equity justice principle* striving for a balanced input-output ratio or tit-for-tat reciprocities.

With regard to sharing systems, this ideology manifests itself in so-called "pseudo-sharing" models (Belk, 2014). "Pseudo-sharing" refers to commercial exchange systems (Lamberton & Rose, 2012) or access-based consumption models (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012) which primarily aim at efficiently coordinating joint use of idle capacity that would otherwise go unused. As these systems' ultimate goal is to maximize usage efficiency and utility of involved parties, they need to be distinguished from pro-social sharing systems (Belk, 2014).

## 3. Research Context

Foodsharing.de is an online platform with the goal to save surplus food from being thrown away and to share it with others still using it. It was initiated in Germany in 2012 as a reaction to growing awareness of living in a "throwaway society" in which large shares of produced foods end unused in trashcans. Since the website's launch in December 2012, 427,171 kg of food have been saved by 7,156 participating individuals, with over 63,000 people following foodsharing on Facebook and 9,000 cooperative arrangements with retailers established. The platform connects retailers and individuals who have surplus food to give away with individuals volunteering to collect and distribute the food (named foodsavers) for

further use. No monetary flows are involved at any moment in time and the foodsharing platform positions itself as ‘ethical sharing’.

**4. Methodology and Data Analysis**

Data collection started in January 2013 and includes participant observation, in-depth interviews as well as netnographic methods. Our total sample comprises in-depth interviews with 13 foodsharing members, 47 pages of field notes as well as comprehensive online data from media coverage, social media sites, WhatsApp messaging groups, personal blogs, and online discussion forums. Data interpretation followed a hermeneutic approach (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) and field notes and comparisons with web-content (i.e., participants’ online profiles and entries on discussion boards) served as sources of triangulation to validate information reported in the interviews (Mays & Pope, 1995).

**5. Findings**

Following prior studies in consumer research (Kozinets, 2008), we will illustrate the interplay of ideologies and understandings of justice by means of three different narratives that prevail in the foodsharing community. The presentation of our findings follows Figure 1, displaying how different ideologies are dynamically enacted, negotiated and synthesized through evolving narratives.

The initial idea of foodsharing.de was based on an idea by Raphael Fellner and Valentin Thurn – both German food activists – who launched the fight against food waste in developed countries. Their idea was to (re-)use and distribute food items that had been declared as waste by the official market: Consistent with the ecological ideology, their major aim was to provide and preserve a livable present and future for everyone. The emphasis on “everyone” reveals the justice principle of *equality*, according to which each individual has the same rights to benefit from a common good instead of redistributing or allocating goods in favor of a certain group of individuals.

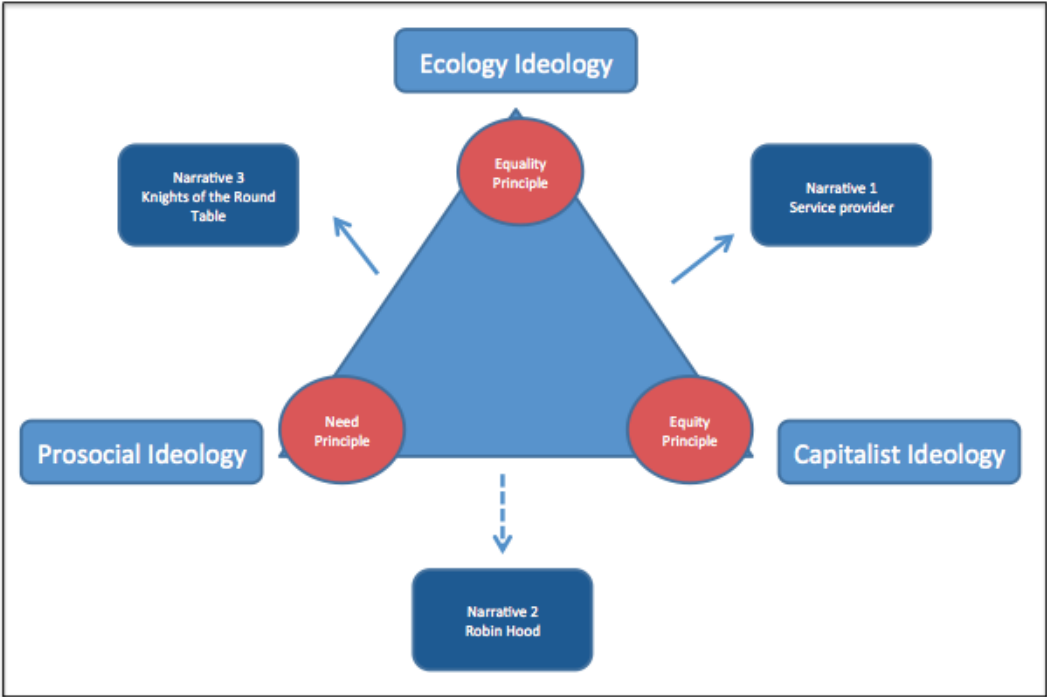


Figure 1. Ideologies and Narratives.

*Narrative 1: The service provider*

Foodsharing is based on the cooperation between consumers and retailers, as foodsavers rely on retailers to provide them with food waste that is going to be redistributed among private individuals. The initial ecological ideology, however, turned out not to be a convincing argument for retailers in light of the capitalist ideology they are embedded in. Retailers were even reluctant to openly display their cooperation with foodsharing for potential equity concerns: indeed, some retailers suspected personal gain by foodsharers at the expense of usual consumers paying the full price for the food.

As a reaction, foodsavers shifted to a service-oriented line of argumentation to frame their originally ecological message in a more contextually appropriate (i.e., capitalist) way. By shifting the ecological ideology towards a capitalist one, foodsharing.de embraced the equity justice principle in its narrative.

*“A green consciousness and better sleep often does not count as an argument. But we can tighten it to money. You save expenses for waste disposal, because we sort your waste and filter out what is still eatable. We sort the waste! That means that your employees only put the waste somewhere and we do what your employee would usually have to do. What we can also offer you: A sticker which you can visibly display for your consumers saying that you don’t waste food”. (Barbara, foodsharing ambassador)*

#### *Narrative 2: Robin-Hood-Story*

The capitalist ideology as promoted by the “service provider” narrative, however, encountered resistance from within the foodsharing community. Proponents of a pro-social ideology pitched in the principle of need justice to counter an over-capitalist and elitist framing of the food sharing community’s mission. They advocated the allocation of surplus food to the needy, similar to the story of Robin Hood - an unrecognized knight who fights for the rights of the poorest.

*“Who considers himself too good for distributing food to homeless people, who only wants to take and not to give (sharing!!!), should (...) not act as an altruistic helper”. (Nino, former foodsharing ambassador)*

#### *Narrative 3: The Knights of the Round Table*

While the Robin Hood narrative was perceived noble by some, it also challenged the foodsharing organizers’ initial mission to reduce food waste. In fact, the Robin Hood narrative implicitly requires retailers to keep supplying surplus food. The goal of the foodsharing.de founders, however, is to achieve a decrease in surplus food on the part of retailers. The defenders of the original idea thus countered the powerful Robin Hood narrative through an equally heroic narrative similar to a “Knights of the Round Table” story. According to this narrative, foodsavers are similar to knights fighting for a better world through personal example and sacrifice. They set example by sacrificing parts of their valuable time and convenient lifestyle by “saving” and eating surplus “waste” food and educating society about the perils of an over-consumerist lifestyle.

### **6. Discussion: Co-constitutive Ideologies and Stable Structures**

Conflicting or sometimes overlapping worldviews such as ecological, pro-social and capitalist ideologies strive for synthesis, i.e., resolution (Marx, 1956). By means of an ethnography in the context of a German foodsharing community, we show how the negotiation of ideologies and underlying principles of justice follows the classic dramaturgical structure of thesis, antithesis and synthesis structure: Threatened by conflicting ideologies of fair sharing, the original ecological ideology of foodsharing is being re-negotiated through different narratives. While our analysis follows a chronological structure, it should be kept in mind that those negotiations form an on-going dynamic discourse.

The retailers' capitalist ideology challenged the ecological foodsaver ideology (thesis) through suspicion of personal gain from free food (antithesis). In response, foodsavers created the "service provider" narrative (synthesis) to embrace the capitalist equity principle (tit-for-tat). Then, the pro-social camp within the community challenged an overly capitalistic framing of foodsharing as service provider through a heroic Robin Hood narrative promoting the needs principle of justice (thesis). This narrative in turn was at odds and endangered the ecological ideology of foodsharing (antithesis), namely the reduction of food waste. In response, proponents of the original idea created an equally heroic counter-narrative of the "Knights of the Round Table" (synthesis).

By taking a theoretical perspective, prior research has shown that ideology informs, drives and guides consumption and consumer practices in general (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Üstüner & Holt, 2007) and vice-versa (McAlexander, Dufault, Martin, & Schouten, 2014). This was also found in our sharing context where ideology shapes practice.

We add to prior studies by showing how ideology (e.g. the ecological foodsharing ideology) shapes the practices of a third party (i.e. of a retailer). That means the third party embodies an ideological conflict between a foreign value system and its own values. By turning the foreign value system into practice, the own ideology is challenged leading to new ideological tensions that ask for resolution.

According to Giesler (2008) and Thompson & Coskuner-Balli (2008) conflicting ideologies are expressed through practices and narratives and will compete in order to gain dominance over each other. Our analysis in contrast highlights how the interplay of different ideologies can be dynamically balanced through a fluent narrative of the main actor that accommodates different social interests in a multifaceted ideological field. The bridging function of consumer narratives that are at the same time influenced by ideology and shaping it emphasizes the fluid connection between the material (i.e. practices) and the socio-cultural values and ideals of the immaterial world. In contrast to prior research, our findings indicate that a synthesis between different ideological tensions can be reached, resulting in a (temporary) stable market system where the ideologies of different actors are aligned.

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