

J. Chelekis: Risks and Strategies of Amazonian Households

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**Risks and strategies of Amazonian households: Retail sales and mass-market consumption among *caboclo* women**

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*The Amazon is widely regarded as a peripheral region, connected to international economies as a supplier of forest materials. However, little research investigates other ways Amazonian residents are connected to global markets, especially through the sale and consumption of mass-produced goods. This article presents ethnographic research investigating the risks and value of working as a direct sales representative for global beauty brands in three Amazonian communities. While direct sales offers potentially significant income, in practice, most representatives earn meager profits or just break even; many lose money, and some fall into debt. I address the question of why women would pursue an activity with a high risk of financial loss from an institutional and feminist economic perspective. The findings reveal that the risk of*

*debt, as well as the potential household contribution from direct sales, derives from the particular institutional environment that characterizes rural Amazonian communities. The appeal of direct sales lies in the opportunities it affords for social inclusion and enhancing household well-being. These opportunities include access to discounted consumer goods, social bonds through sales relationships, and participation in “global sociality” through direct sales catalogs and products.*

Keywords: Brazilian Amazon, Direct Sales, Household Economies, Gender

ELIANE: I only sell Avon when I have some other job to back it up, it's too expensive otherwise. Like when I stopped teaching, I also stopped selling. But if I get another job I would start selling again.

JESSICA: How do you mean? Don't you earn money selling Avon?

ELIANE, *laughing*: Sometimes, yes . . . but when customers are late with their payments, I still have to pay Avon [the company] on time. So I need another income as a safety net.

This exchange captures a puzzling feature of working in direct sales in the rural Amazon: There is a substantial risk of losing money. Although many direct sales representatives described their frustration and difficulties with collecting money from customers, they also expressed great fondness for the companies they worked for and the products they sold. Avon and Natura are widely popular beauty brands that employ women as company representatives to sell their products through nationally distributed, bimonthly catalogs. Direct sales companies promise empowerment and self-realization in advertising campaigns. Company literature aimed toward their sales force assumes a profit orientation and encourages aspirational goals to significantly

change their lives through sales. But in rural Amazonia, obligations to sell on informal credit and housekeeping expectations mean that a profit orientation in direct sales is not only difficult but fraught with the risk of losing money and falling into debt.

The poverty rate is high in the Brazilian Amazon, at 42% for the entire region<sup>1</sup> (Celetano, Santos, and Verissimo 2010). This decreases somewhat among rural Amazonian smallholders when well-being indicators also account for nonfinancial capital and social relations, due to their “reduced dependence on the cash economy” (Guedes et al. 2012, 42). Residents of Ponta de Pedras are commonly referred to as *caboclos*, defined as a historical peasantry of mixed European, indigenous, and African ancestry (Parker 1985). Owing to a legacy of underdevelopment, the Amazon is a peripheral world region, connected to international economies as a supplier of forest and agricultural goods since the beginning of European colonization (Bunker 1985). Poor infrastructure and low incomes mean that mass-produced consumer goods are quite limited in this area. But this has slowly changed over the past decades as more consumer goods have become accessible through increasing urbanization (Richards and VanWey 2015).

Direct sales companies are common around the world and are popular in developing regions (Cahn 2011). Working as representatives is usually considered an innocuous way for women to earn extra income. But in the lower Amazon, direct sales is risky business. Risk is defined as “unpredictable variation in the outcome of a behavior. . . . Outcomes can be assigned odds but not determined in advance” (Winterhalder, Lu, and Tucker 1999, 302–3). The risk of direct sales affects the likelihood that a household will not produce enough resources to meet its needs, as understood in the “safety first” concept (Roy 1952). Because *caboclo* households typically have low and/or irregular cash incomes, informal credit is a prevalent practice and

social norm among retailers. Direct sales *potentially* leads to financial as well as social losses, but it can also increase women's empowerment and household resilience. As a corollary to risk, *resilience* is defined as "the capacity of individuals, households, and communities to anticipate and recover from trauma, shock, disasters, and change" (Tucker and Nelson, this issue).

As a form of retailing, direct sales is very different from the traditional productive activities widely studied among rural Amazonian populations. To date, however, little research has examined how Brazilian *caboclos* participate in global markets through the sale and consumption of mass-produced goods. To understand why women in Amazonia would pursue a mostly unprofitable activity with a high risk of financial debt, I apply Oughton, Wheelock, and Baines's (2003) perspective on microbusinesses as a potential route to social inclusion for rural households. I examine direct sales as a multidimensional economic activity that contributes to the well-being of households not only as a form of income. Far from managerial visions, Amazonian women pursue direct sales not for life-changing profits but because it facilitates personal and household consumption, provides a platform for social participation in community relationships, and allows for participation in global fashion trends as a form of "global sociality." After presenting the theoretical perspective and methodology, I discuss how gender ideologies and particular features of the institutional environment form conditions that facilitate and constrain women's work in direct sales. I then compare the role of direct sales in three study communities, each characterized by different household livelihood strategies.

In all three communities, women pursue strategies to minimize this risk and enhance their own and their families' consumption and social inclusion in their communities and networks. Yet important differences emerge from this analysis, indicating that the value and potential social inclusion afforded by direct sales cannot be understood in isolation, merely from its own

attributes. The role of direct sales can only be understood as embedded in an entire economic and institutional context, in relation to other economic activities—particularly the gendered nature of these activities and the variety of opportunities for women (or lack thereof).

### **Theoretical perspective**

Institutional and feminist economics on social provisioning trace their epistemological roots to substantivist perspectives in economic anthropology (Polanyi, cited in Oughton and Wheelock 2006) combined with elements from Sen's capabilities approach with an explicit focus on gendered dimensions of economic activities. They reject methodological individualism and the rational choice model in favor of understanding economics as the social provisioning of human life (Ferber and Nelson 2009; Power 2004), placing the economy within the social world and modifying Sen's (1999) focus on well-being (rather than poverty) to apply to households as well as individuals. This perspective assumes that economic and social life are integrated and that power and social inequalities are not naturally given but are culturally and socially constructed (Nelson 2006). Amazonian households are thus an institution engaged in provisioning activities for its members, embedded within a social environment in which other institutions and actors enable and constrain its activities. Cultural norms and values, such as gender ideals and *caboclo* stereotypes, work on all levels of the institutional environment.

This perspective allows us to explore the possibility that direct sales, with its risk of debt and scarce profits, can enable social inclusion beyond a potential supplemental household income. Because women in rural Amazonia have relatively fewer opportunities for work that takes them out of the household and into the community, I use Oughton, Wheelock, and Baines's (2003) framework for analyzing the role of microbusinesses in household well-being. They

situate microbusinesses within the context of household livelihood strategies, focusing on microbusinesses as a potential path toward social inclusion. Social inclusion is here understood as the ability to exercise agency in the manner of their civic, economic, social, and personal integration into society (Commins 1994). Specifically regarding the livelihood strategies of *caboclo* Amazonian households, Guedes et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of taking nonfinancial capital into account in assessing well-being, as monetary income forms only a small part of the largely informal economy.

I examine the potential for direct sales to facilitate two aspects of social inclusion as a necessary prerequisite for well-being: maintaining and strengthening social networks and access to household goods and personal care products. Social capital in the form of reliable networks of family and friends is a vital aspect of inclusion and well-being and has been widely recognized in Amazonian *caboclo* studies (e.g., Brondízio 2011; Murrieta and WinklerPrins 2003; Pinedo-Vásquez and Padoch 2009). Because the premise of direct sales is to use one's social network to make sales, participation can enhance social inclusion by intensifying bonds through personal exchanges. However, recognition of the importance of nonfinancial capital in household well-being has so far not extended to serious examination of access to mass-produced consumer goods. In the following sections, I show how direct sales is often used as a convenient source for discounted products that are otherwise difficult for households to obtain. In other words, working as a direct sales representative is valued just as much (sometimes more) as an opportunity for consumption as a source of income. This study responds to Oughton, Wheelock, and Baines's (2003) call for more attention to consumption in research on rural households and well-being. Consumption practices are at the heart of meeting households' needs in terms of material well-being and as expressions of familial and social relationships (Miller 1998).

## Methodology

The principal ethnographic research was conducted from October 2008 to August 2009. The municipality of Ponta de Pedras contains floodplain forest, where the river (*ribeirinho*) communities are located, and upland (*terra firme*) savanna and forest accessible by road. While açáí production constitutes the primary economic activity in *ribeirinho* communities, agriculture—especially the production of beans as a cash crop—dominates in *terra firme* communities. Consequently, gender roles and household decision making follow different patterns. Açáí production is largely the domain of older boys and men in *ribeirinho* communities; in the *terra firme* communities, men and women often work side by side in agricultural production. In the town of Ponta de Pedras, households have the most variation in economic activities and gendered divisions of labor, where public employment, microbusinesses, and casual labor comprise the majority of livelihoods.

To understand how direct sales fits into these very different yet interlinked household economies, I lived with host families in town, in the *ribeirinho* community of Rio Fortaleza, and in the *terra firme* communities of Antonio Vieira and Jagarajó. In each community, I worked with a few direct sales representatives, observed their sales calls and delivery visits, and talked to them about their work. I also conducted informal, unstructured interviews with approximately thirty-one other direct sales representatives. At the time of research, at least thirteen different direct sales catalogs circulated in the municipality of Ponta de Pedras; the three most prevalent direct sales companies were Avon, Hermes, and Natura.

Five direct sales representatives participated in a focus group, in which we discussed gender roles, expectations from women's work in each community, and the decision-making

process for participating in direct sales. As an in-depth conversation focusing on emerging themes from participant observation, the focus group served as an intermediate step between participant observation and the household survey. With help from an assistant, the survey was applied to a total of ninety-eight households, thirty-seven of which had at least one member working in direct sales and sixty-one that did not. Forty-two of these surveys were conducted in the upland communities Antonio Vieira and Jagarajó, thirty-eight were conducted in the town of Ponta de Pedras, and eighteen were conducted in Rio Fortaleza. In the upland communities, all eight households that had a member working in direct sales and thirty-four households with no direct sales representative were surveyed, selected through stratified random sampling. In Rio Fortaleza, I interviewed nine out of the fifteen households with representatives and nine households with no direct sales representatives, selected through a nonrandom, opportunistic approach with the help of my host family. In town, the representative households were randomly selected by obtaining the most recent lists of representatives from the Avon coordinator in town and the Hermes franchise owner, assigning them a number, and then using a random number generator to select twenty households. The nonrepresentative households were chosen through a snowball approach.

### **Background: The Açaí economy and the market for consumer goods**

Ponta de Pedras's economy is based firmly in açaí production. Açaí is a palm fruit (*Euterpe oleracea* Mart.) and an important staple in the local diet as well as a cash crop. Açaí has come under increasing agroforestry management by local producers in the river interior as the market has steadily expanded over the past three decades (Brondízio 2008). Smallholders and tenants produce açaí to be sold locally and for export, and most residents have unsteady incomes



that follow seasonal cycles. Even those who are not directly involved in the açaí economy are affected by these cycles; money flows more freely in the local economy during the harvest, from October through January. The majority of people with regular incomes are public employees and those receiving government benefits.

Despite limitations on residents' purchasing power, demand is high for direct sales products. Many types of consumer goods are not available for sale in the small stores and informal retail stands in Ponta de Pedras, and these businesses do not provide the array of product choices available in direct sales catalogs. Makeup; personal care products; clothing and shoes; household items such as plastic containers, pots and pans, blankets, sheets, and dust covers; and a host of other consumer goods are available for purchase through direct sales. Placing an order with a neighbor and having purchases delivered in person is much more convenient than a costly trip to Belém for shopping, which requires at least a one-night stay in the city.

### **Institutionalized informal credit**

Informal credit constitutes an important institutional characteristic of Amazonian market systems. In the Amazon, as elsewhere, selling goods on credit is a long-standing practice as a legacy of *aviamento*, a complex system of supply and credit established during the nineteenth-century rubber boom. Rubber tappers were at the bottom of the supply–credit chain, exchanging latex for basic household items at local trading posts for such inflated prices that they were nearly always kept perpetually in debt (Schmink and Wood 1992). Throughout the Amazon, informal traders continue to provide credit for household goods in exchange for forest and agricultural crops (Schwartzman 1991; Walker 2012). In some places, these traders are quite

powerful; and although they are reviled as taking advantage of poor farmers with limited means, they often offer the best of limited options for acquiring household staples (Walker 2012).

The exploitation of indebted farmers, extractivists, and casual laborers has been well documented (Schmink and Wood 1992), but the pervasive necessity for informal credit also means that those who go into retailing and vending with limited capital—both economic and social—are vulnerable to economic losses from the inconvenient to the catastrophic if they fail to collect on their customers' debts. For direct sales representatives, extending credit is unavoidable. As Marissa, the Avon coordinator, stated, "If she [the representative] doesn't sell on credit, she's not going to sell anything." Credit is expected at least among friends and relatives, although terms of repayment may be negotiated on the basis of past exchanges and current circumstances. In most situations, at least some amount of payment is required at the time of purchase, usually half the cost, and an agreement is reached for payment of the second half. However, Nina, one of the most successful Natura representatives, told me,

No one will ever voluntarily hand you the money they owe you. It is the seller's job to chase them down. If they can't pay the day you visit them, you find out when they're getting paid, and you be the first person to knock on their door, because most people have a lot of debts. . . . If you get to their door too late, even on pay day, they will say they have no money left. Then you have no choice but to wait until next pay day, and try again.

When a customer consistently avoids a creditor or repeatedly gives excuses for not paying, the vendor must decide whether to continue pursuing payment from the customer or cut her losses and give up. *Caloteira* is Amazonian slang for someone who refuses to pay his or her debts altogether, and I often heard direct sales representatives use this term in conversations

about collecting payments. If a customer orders a product without ever intending to pay for it, the credit relationship is destroyed. One day I walked onto Marissa's porch to find her in animated discussion with two other representatives. One of them was warning the others about a certain *caloteira*: "Listen, so you don't fall for her tricks—don't give her anything, you'll never see a payment from her. . . . You know, Marlene from the bar on the street, Tomas's wife." Another responded, "Oh yes, I know she's dangerous." They went on for some time naming and discussing various *caloteiros* they had each encountered.

Earning a reputation as a *caloteiro* through shared stories such as these is the only sanction for the worst offenders. This is because there is no formal or legal recourse for a direct sales representative if a customer does not pay for a product he or she has taken on credit. In the absence of legal backing to enforce payment, direct sales representatives rely primarily on their ability to pressure customers for payment through persistence and making use of social capital. For example, Nina told me how she once dealt with a customer who had repeatedly refused to pay by stealing her bicycle. When the customer asked for the bicycle back, Nina informed her that she had taken it as collateral and would return the bicycle when the customer paid her bill. She deceived the customer by implying that she had spoken with a city official who gave her implicit approval to do this. In actuality, the city councilman informed her that such a move is completely illegal. While she managed to pull off this particular stunt, she confessed that she was scared of being caught and would never dare try it again.

Yet *caloteiros* are only responsible for a minority of missed payments. Most customers unable to pay on time cite mitigating circumstances. They intend to pay and eventually find a way to do so, though it may take several months or even a year; and direct sales representatives would rather receive late payments than none at all. However, they are still obliged to pay the

direct sales company on time, and unlike themselves, the companies do have legal enforcement of their sales contracts. The financial risk is higher for relatively poorer representatives, who typically lack the social capital to pursue payment from customers. Selena, a shy single mother with no income other than a modest welfare check and her mother's pension, sold Avon for eight months before she gave up. She said she simply did not have the courage to keep asking for payments owed to her. Unlike Nina, who has family connections in local government, Selena would not dream of leveraging collateral in such a confrontational manner.

### **Gendered and economic limits on direct sales**

#### Gender ideologies

In Ponta de Pedras, the inequality of traditional gender ideals has structuring effects on women's daily activities and public mobility and visibility. Some men do not like the idea of their wives earning money and supporting themselves; they feel threatened by their wives' economic power and feel it erodes their masculinity as the household breadwinner. On the other hand, many men do not mind, and even encourage their wives to earn money. During the focus group, all participants agreed that most men wanted their wives to contribute to supporting the household. Nonetheless, some experience anxiety over their wives' movements in public spaces; they did not like the idea of their wives going out in public without them, because they would encounter other men.

For other husbands, their concern is not that their wives will cheat on them or flirt with others but that their work will take up too much of their time so that they are not home to do their domestic chores, especially cooking meals. Lunch is the biggest meal of the day and often takes the better part of the morning to prepare. In her research on gender relations and decision making

in rural communities of Ponta de Pedras, Siqueira (2009, 247) notes that while all household members, including children, may participate in productive activities, few men are willing to help with domestic chores: “This double workload for women is rarely acknowledged and frequently contested. It is quite common to hear the women themselves remark, after hours of toil on the plantation or milling manioc flour, that she was simply ‘helping her husband’ as opposed to working.” Across the Amazon, studies have found that women’s work in fishing, rubber tapping, and agriculture commonly goes unrecognized and undervalued (Álvares 1995; Campbell 1996; Simonian 2001).

Nevertheless, there is also a small minority of men who willingly reverse gender roles by performing most of the domestic chores while supporting their wives in their work. I met one such couple in a *terra firme* community. The wife works as a seamstress and is often away from home delivering orders and picking up materials. Her husband is an agriculturalist and fisherman; he works near home and sets his own schedule. Because of this arrangement, he takes care of most of the domestic tasks. His wife told me that she gets embarrassed when neighbors pass by and see him hanging laundry out to dry; she is afraid people will talk about her not being a good wife. Sometimes she makes him let her hang the laundry to dry so her neighbors will not talk about them. This example demonstrates diverse enactments, negotiations, and remaking of gender roles and shows that those who challenge gendered divisions of labor are still subject to neighbors’ judgment.

Gal (2002) examines how gender roles are reworked among blue-collar US housewives who respond to the need to increase household incomes by taking up direct selling. In choosing direct sales, these women “recalibrate” the public–private divide and apply it to the context of paid work (Gal 2002, 82–83). When they feel pressure to contribute to the household income,

those who choose direct sales do not consider it to be “real” work. The paradox of direct sales is that it simultaneously adheres to and challenges traditional gender roles. This paradox is fully evident in Ponta de Pedras, where the answers to my questions revealed a struggle over the public discourse on gender roles and women’s paid work. Direct sales is unambiguously feminine activity, yet men often express anxiety and reservations about their wives working in direct sales.

Marissa explained that there is a common pattern to men’s reactions to their wives wanting to work in direct sales. First, they object to it because they think it is a waste of time. But they also feel threatened because they are unsure as to how this new activity will affect their customary routine. Then, if the representative is persistent, her husband gradually realizes that she is really helping out with the expenses and that this is a good thing. She said some men turn completely around, from forbidding their wives to work to eventually helping them deliver and pick up orders. This is how Eriene, one of the most successful direct sales representatives, got started. “At first, I had to sneak around behind his back,” she told me, referring to her husband. “He got mad when he found out what I was doing, and for two years he complained about it. But eventually he accepted it. . . . Now, he likes that I sell, and he places his own orders from time to time.”

#### Direct sales in household strategies

Owing to gender ideologies regarding women’s domestic work, combined with limited sales potential, direct sales is almost never a primary source of income. The high unemployment and poverty rate severely restricts the amount of sales the average representative can expect to achieve. The household survey revealed that within each community, the economic strategies of

households with and without direct sales representatives are very similar, as illustrated in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Clearly, working in direct sales is not related to major transformations or differences in households' economic strategies. At best, direct sales provides a supplemental income to the primary household productive activities. This is not to say they are unimportant: Supplemental sources of income are much more significant for poor families, for whom an extra 60 Brazilian reais per month<sup>2</sup> helps put food on the table or facilitates river transportation.

Therefore most representatives have developed conservative sales strategies to minimize the financial risk that comes with the obligation to sell on informal credit. They often avoid customers who place large orders, explaining that customers who owe only a small amount of money are more likely to pay than those who owe a large sum. Many representatives also try to avoid customers who do not have a steady income, especially during the açaí off-season. They seek out customers among those they know have a steady income through government employment or benefits. While these strategies may reduce the likelihood of late payments, they also foreclose the potential for further profits.

Women are sometimes able to call upon other family members to help in a pinch while they are out working, but few can rely on this help on a permanent basis. When asked about the possibilities of living on the income from Avon sales, one representative replied,

It's hard to make Avon your full-time job. To really make money, you have to spend all day making house calls, and that means having someone at home to take care of house work and cook lunch. I know about an older woman who used to spend all day visiting people, selling Avon. . . . Maybe she still does, but I haven't seen her recently.

In sum, the combined effects of traditional roles and high unemployment, uncertain incomes, and informal credit create conditions in which women risk losing money and possible indebtedness in pursuing direct sales. This risk in turn has two important effects: First, the potential profits in direct sales are severely diminished, so that direct sales is not a viable means for pursuing an independent livelihood; second, particularly poor women cannot obtain nearly the same benefits from direct sales as those in better socioeconomic situations. Nevertheless, direct sales can also help increase household resilience, social inclusion, and well-being by increasing women's decision-making power within the household and facilitating access to mass-produced household staples and consumer goods. The common narrative regarding men's eventual acceptance of their wives' work illustrates that when recognized as legitimate, appropriate work for women in the household, direct sales can increase women's social inclusion through economic and social engagement.

### **Empowerment, household provisioning, and social inclusion**

In all three communities, women working in direct sales are more likely to have sole decision-making control over the income they earn compared to women who do not work in direct sales. Generally speaking, direct sales offers a limited form of empowerment in all three regions of Ponta de Pedras. It is limited in the sense that direct sales is not a viable path toward making substantive socioeconomic change for the representative and her family. It does not replace the dominant household economic activities; but as a supplement, it boosts the resilience of households to face unexpected expenses, though profits for most representatives are unsteady. Many only send in orders once a month or every other month, and even those who send orders twice per month often do not see immediate profits from their sales because they have yet to



collect payment from customers. Nevertheless, participation in this activity, even in periods of low or no profit, symbolizes a woman's independent economic activity, providing an enabling platform to foster customer relationships and community participation. Participants commonly expressed the opinion that contributing to household income is directly linked to decision-making power. As one representative put it,

women who don't work, they don't get to have any say in household decisions; he makes all the money, he gets to make the decisions. She has to eat whatever he wants to eat.

This is not a good way to live. It's a beautiful thing for a woman to work and have her own money and independence.

The consumption opportunities afforded through direct sales constitute an important avenue for household provisioning. Representatives for Avon and Natura, for example, earn 30% commission on their sales, effectively constituting a discount on items they purchase for themselves or family members. The strategy is to select specific items she would like to buy and then collect just enough orders from customers to cover the cost of the product. Throughout the fieldwork period, I visited many homes furnished almost entirely from catalogs, and personal care products (deodorants, soaps, perfumes, and lotions) from Avon and Natura are often displayed on trays and shelves in the front room for everyone to see.

Figure 1 illustrates how participation in direct sales potentially leads to increased household resilience through provisioning and women's (limited) empowerment, which in turn contributes to increased social inclusion.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

**Figure 1** Route to social inclusion.

As mentioned earlier, the dominant economic modes in each of the study communities—açaf production in Rio Fortaleza; agriculture in Antonio Vieira/Jagarajó; the diversity of public employment and casual work in town—have different implications for the gendered divisions of labor. These economic arrangements have some effect on the number of representatives in each community, their average profits, and the degree to which direct sales facilitates social inclusion. Likewise, the risks of financial debt and of damaging social relationships, and the relative size of these risks, arise from pursuing direct sales within the particular institutional and economic arrangements of each community and a household's specific socioeconomic status.

Ponta de Pedras

The town of Ponta de Pedras has the highest population and population density compared to the interior communities and the highest level of socioeconomic inequality. The most common sources of income are government benefits, casual labor, informal retailing/trading, and public employment. The household survey indicates that representatives in town earn the highest average profit for each order (140.70 Brazilian reais, US\$68), but also with the highest standard deviation (178) of the three communities. Successful representatives often said they had difficulties at first but that they were able to overcome their husbands' objections and their own shyness in dealing with customers so that their friendships grew, along with their income (*a amizade cresceu, e lucro também*).

However, representatives in town also reported the most problems with slow-paying customers and *caloteiros* than either of the interior communities. And many poorer women are

unable to leverage direct sales into increased social inclusion. Representatives often described the potential losses from direct sales the same way: “When a customer doesn’t pay, the representative loses three things: the money, the product, and the relationship.” I witnessed a tense exchange one day when a customer charged over to Maria’s house, a part-time assistant for the Avon coordinator. Tired of being asked to pay, she emphatically slammed a plastic bag containing a large bottle of perfume onto the porch railing and shouted, “Here’s your perfume!” Maria, whom I had only known to be soft-spoken, became angry and yelled, “Negative! Negative! I’m not accepting this back!” But the customer ignored her and rode away on her bicycle. Maria walked out after her holding the bag and shouting names at the woman before turning back to the porch, muttering sarcastically, “This is awesome” (*é pai d’egua*). Although most exchanges are not nearly as dramatic, representatives told me that once they realize a customer is simply unwilling to pay, they try to avoid him or her in public. Many former representatives said they quit direct sales because they could not collect payments, which hurt them socially as well as financially.

Antonio Vieira/Jagarajó

In contrast to the heterogeneity of livelihoods in town, households in the *terra firme* communities of Antonio Vieira and Jagarajó primarily work in agriculture. Other sources of income include government benefits and fishing. Compared to both town and the river interior, these communities have the lowest number of representatives: only 8 were actively selling in these communities of approximately 175 households. Like most interior communities, they comprise large family networks. The direct sales representatives here belonged to poorer households. The average profit per order was approximately 64 Brazilian reais (US\$33), far

lower than the average in town, although higher than in the river interior (discussed later).

Claudia, a young Avon representative in Jagarajó, told me that her customers are mostly relatives, but as she explained, “Selling to your relatives is the worst. They think, ‘Oh, it’s just Claudia. I can pay whenever.’ So they end up never paying!”

The relative unpopularity of direct sales in Antonio Vieira/Jagarajó can be partly attributed to the fact that these are tight-knit communities in which households frequently work together in agricultural activities. In town, direct sales provides women with a reason to socialize outside of their own homes; the women in these *terra firme* communities do not need it for this reason. Women’s participation in agricultural activities means many also do not see direct sales as a means for contributing to the household. The survey indicates that couples in Antonio Vieira and Jagarajó more commonly pool their income and manage it together than do those in town and the river interior. In this case, social inclusion is not an issue on the household level; but well-being—defined as inclusion *and* agency in different spheres of life—remains a salient issue for the entire community and for other communities like it. This is clearly beyond the scope of possibilities direct sales can offer.

### Rio Fortaleza

Of the three study communities, Rio Fortaleza has the smallest population and lowest population density; not only are there far fewer households but they are much more dispersed. Yet there are more direct sales representatives here than in the *terra firme* communities, and Rio Fortaleza has the highest ratio of representatives to residents. The popularity of direct sales among women in the *ribeirinho* interior is a testament to women’s relative exclusion from açai production and their lack of alternative income-generating activities. This explains why, despite

earning very low profits (approximately 51 Brazilian reais, or US\$27), the ratio of direct sales representatives to customers in Rio Fortaleza is disproportionately high.

Many people in Rio Fortaleza remarked that there are simply too many representatives. As one resident put it, “You finish talking to one, and as she’s leaving another one arrives at your door.” When asked about whom they sell to, one representative replied, “We often sell to each other. . . . It’s a way to work things out.” Informants’ discussions about other kinds of work that yield little to no profit suggest that direct sales is not unique in this regard. For example, one representative informed me that her husband transports açai up the river, going as far as Manaus. But when he has to travel so far, she told me, he almost makes no profit at all, only enough to break even, sometimes little more. But he does it, nevertheless, for something to do, so as not to stay still. The picture of representatives selling to each other indicates that direct sales is highly valued as a pleasurable and meaningful activity in itself, as a platform for entertainment and socializing. One representative explained, “Sometimes, people sit around the house with nothing to do. Selling a catalog is a chance to learn more about life, to get out and visit with friends.”

### **“Global sociality”: Modernity through direct sales**

The interview exchange that opened this article suggests that there may be something more to the appeal of direct sales than access to a supplemental income and discounted personal items. Some women, like Alane in Jaguarajó, claimed that they nearly quit altogether several times and continue to contemplate doing so once in a while. When asked why she continues to sell, she responded, “I don’t want to give it up. I love Avon, I love the products.” This sentiment was frequently echoed among direct sales representatives who often complained about losing money and the difficulties they encountered. Women often used the phrase *é legal* (it’s cool) to

describe their attraction to direct sales. Like Alane, Maria talked about how much she loves the Avon brand and the products. But she does not like selling, and she emphasized that she greatly dislikes collecting payments, the two core activities of the business of direct sales. She said she does not have many clients and was not concerned with finding more.

Without selling the products and collecting the payments, what is left of “working” with Avon? How can working with direct sales catalogs be a cool thing if, for many representatives, they rarely earn money and have a difficult time collecting payments from customers? I suggest that direct sales is an opportunity not only to participate in an organization in which they feel a sense of belonging but to become involved in a material, globalized world of consumer goods and beauty fashions. This is connected to the difficulty of obtaining ordinary consumer goods in rural municipalities such as Ponta de Pedras as well as to the peculiar form of marginalization and invisibility that marks *caboclo* relationships to the outside world. I propose that Amazonian modernity, often expressed through certain kinds of consumer goods, is related to a regional bid for recognition and inclusion in global consumer culture.

Nugent (1993) has demonstrated how *caboclo* societies pose an especially difficult problem for academic inquiry. Their invisibility stems from the idealization of the Amazon as a purely “natural” region, the Brazilian national frontier, removed and marginalized from state formation and national identity. The themes of invisibility and outsiders’ miscomprehension of social realities are consistently noted in anthropological research with *caboclos* (Adams et al. 2009; Cleary 1993; Hecht and Cockburn 2010; Moran 1993). While the term *caboclo* is linked to Amazonian cultural heritage and at times deployed in political discourse (Brondízio 2008), it still has negative connotations for the people in Ponta de Pedras. One elderly gentleman in Antonio Vieira informed me that, “in the past, there were a lot of *caboclos* [here],” implying that they are

no longer there. When asked who are *caboclos*, a schoolteacher in Antonio Vieira responded, “A *caboclo* is someone who isn’t educated, but really, *caboclos* are a thing of the past. I am not *caboclo*, and I wouldn’t call the uneducated people in Jagarajó *caboclos*. It’s offensive.”

Harris (2009) argues that Amazonian *ribeirinhos* have a specific way of living “in the present.” This “presentism” is grounded in an understanding of the past as discontinuous from the present, an amnesia between the generations, and a lack of a consolidated group identity centered on social memories or an origin myth (71). The informal economy of *caboclos* escapes the notice of the rest of the world, yet they are intimately tied to exterior forces, and they are always responsive to changes in market opportunities and the availability of government/private structures and services. In the words of Harris’s informants, *ribeirinhos* are “always adjusting.” This discontinuity with the past is fully evident in Ponta de Pedras. I suggest that this presentist way of living is also connected with a painful awareness of “escaping the notice of the rest of the world,” and the consumption of mass-produced goods is a symbolic expression of inclusion in global modernity and fashion.

Professor Elias, the local historian of Ponta de Pedras, explained that the Amazonian North is so disregarded by the rest of Brazil that the national media will disparage their soccer team even when it is doing well. He feels that this discrimination affects the way people here view themselves. With federal assistance programs and the extension of retirement payments to agricultural workers, the Amazonian region has gained a greater degree of inclusion within the Brazilian state, but it is still often viewed as a backward wilderness, a “land of the Indians,” by Brazilians from other regions. I found in Ponta de Pedras a particular discourse about progress and modernity, in terms of both geographical place and the individual. “Progressing” oneself, or moving forward, usually refers to improving one’s situation with a better job or house, but

progress can also apply to the degree of urbanity or rurality of a particular place. The interior is generally viewed as backward, whereas moving to Belém is often cast as moving forward in self-development. An important element marking modern identities is the degree of connectedness to the world beyond rural Amazonia.

Some of the most obvious symbols of consumer modernity in Ponta de Pedras are the widespread cell phones and motorcycles. In some places, like the community of Antonio Vieira, cell phones arrived with electricity. Joab, the community health agent, explained how he felt when electricity came to the community in 2007: “Now, we appear in the world; before, we were in the dark. Now everyone has a cell phone, we have night classes at the school. The world knows that we are here.” Following the premise that consumption goods help to make cultural categories visible (Douglas 1992), consumption of direct sales products in the Amazon—like motorcycles, cell phones, and electricity—is a marker of participation in the modern global present.

## **Conclusion**

Melissa is a sector manager in Ananindeua, on the outskirts of Belém’s city limits. She tells potential recruits that Avon can help “build your dream” or “make your dream come true.” Typical examples of lifelong “dreams” include owning major consumer goods, such as a house or a car, and increasing her and her family’s quality of life by paying for her children’s education or going on a luxury vacation. Melissa emphatically declared that women do not want to sell Avon just because it is a fun thing to do. The point is to make money—not just enough to get by but continually striving to increase one’s profits to make material changes in one’s life. If a



representative has a specific goal for her future profits, she will have greater motivation to sell more Avon products.

Contrary to Melissa's statement, in Ponta de Pedras, many women sell Avon exactly because it is a "fun thing to do"—*é legal*—rather than as a means to achieving a more aspirational lifestyle transformation. Direct sales representatives span the entire socioeconomic spectrum, from middle-class town dwellers to the rural poor in remote *ribeirinho* communities. Unsurprisingly, women who already enjoy a higher household income also earn the most from working in direct sales, as they are less vulnerable to falling into debt from late-paying customers. However, even women who experience the most severe constraints on their decision-making power are sometimes able to use direct sales to assist in household provisioning and community inclusion, along with other creative pursuits, such as organizing community raffles and other types of informal retailing. I have shown how residents' restricted access to mass-produced consumer goods creates a market for the convenience and choice direct sales offers. Ultimately, however, gender ideologies, combined with economic underdevelopment, severely constrain women's earning potential, and the obligation to extend informal credit to customers turns direct selling into a debt risk. Many women value direct sales not only for supplemental profits and consumption opportunities but as means of social inclusion through ongoing exchange relationships with customers and through participation in global beauty trends.

This case exposes how the distinction between productive and consumption market activities is blurred, as direct sales functions as a source of income often for purchasing the very products being sold. The risk in direct sales is the potential to lose money and damage social relationships. When they are successful, direct sales representatives turn a risky business into a strategy of provisioning, increasing household resilience and social inclusion. However, the

findings also indicate that these increases do not translate into substantive changes in household well-being or have any effect on existing socioeconomic inequality. Future research should investigate other forms of retailing mass-produced consumer goods and the associated risks and potentials. While I have presented some hypotheses regarding the relationship between mass-produced goods and Amazonian invisibility and modernity, the connections between livelihood strategies and the cultural meanings of consumer goods in Amazonia require greater attention in future research.

## Notes

1 Poverty is defined here as monthly per capita income half of a monthly minimum salary—approximately 500 Brazilian reais—or less.

2 This is the overall average monthly profit from direct sales, approximately US\$27.

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**Table 1** Comparison of Household Income Sources

	Town		Rio Fortaleza		Antonio Vieira/Jagarajó	
	DSHHs <sup>a</sup>	Non-DSHHs <sup>b</sup>	DSHHs <sup>c</sup>	Non-DSHHs <sup>c</sup>	DSHHs <sup>d</sup>	Non-DSHHs <sup>e</sup>
government benefits	18	18	8	9	7	32
casual labor	14	18			2	14
public employment	9	7				
DS	18	0	7	0	6	0
açaí			9	9		
fishing			7	7	1	13
agriculture					5	26

*Note:* Respondents were asked to list up to five income sources. DS = Direct Sales. DSHH = Direct Sales Household.

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 20. <sup>b</sup>*n* = 18. <sup>c</sup>*n* = 9. <sup>d</sup>*n* = 8. <sup>e</sup>*n* = 34.