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## **The Practice of Fairtrade Support**

### Abstract

This article employs a practice-based approach in order to explore how preferences towards Fairtrade goods emerge and are sustained through engagement in varied social practices. In recent years, the rates of Fairtrade consumption have been growing steadily both within the UK and globally and this growth has been widely represented as the result of thousands of individual citizen-consumers 'voting' for fairer trade. This article moves away from current accounts of (Fairtrade) consumption that rely on models of conscious, expressive and reflexive choice and instead demonstrates how consumption is shaped by shared structures of knowledge, institutional frameworks and infrastructures of provision. In so doing, attention is drawn to the wider practice of Fairtrade support which is collectively constituted by agents from diverse social backgrounds and in which consuming Fairtrade goods forms only one part of what it means to be a 'Fairtrade supporter'.

Keywords: Consumer-citizenship, ethical consumption, Fairtrade, reflexivity, theories of practice

The Fairtrade market within the UK is estimated to double in value every two years (FTF, 2009) suggesting that supporting farmers in the Third World through the purchase of Fairtrade products has become increasingly popular amongst the UK population. The Fairtrade movement has secured a long-line of corporate endorsements (from Cadbury's to Marks & Spencer and Sainsbury's), and has an expanding list of 'Fairtrade Towns' (500 at the time of writing) with active residents who are joined together in a collective

movement for change in which they are helping to expand the provision of Fairtrade goods within their local area, at the same time as creating new communities of practice. Despite the institutionalisation of collective forms of Fairtrade provisioning and the development of collective cultures around the use of Fairtrade goods, existing attempts to explain the growth of the movement have tended to focus their attention upon individualised models of consumer choice (Goodman, 2004; Lyon, 2006; Maniates, 2006; Micheletti, 2003; Murray & Reynolds, 2007; Scammell, 2003).

The Fairtrade consumer is portrayed as a reflexive citizen-consumer who, on becoming aware of global injustices, chooses uniformly to act by 'voting' with their pocket thus performing their citizenly duty towards global others at the same time as constructing their self-identity. It has become common-place for academics, policy makers and movement activists to employ a version of this 'reflexivity thesis' when describing the motivations behind Fairtrade (and other forms of sustainable) consumption. However, Adams and Raisborough have argued that because the 'reflexivity thesis' has been "greeted with a cacophony of critical voices", owing to its tendency to lift individuals out of the social relations they are embedded within and to ignore a whole range of material, cultural and affective factors that are likely to constrain or enable an individual to act, it should be applied with caution to accounts of Fairtrade consumption (Adams and Raisborough, 2008: 1169).

This paper provides an alternative account through its use of Fairtrade supporters' own narratives of their involvement in practices of Fairtrade support to offer a more 'situated' account of how this reflexivity emerges. Using Warde's (2005) application of a theory of practice as a guiding framework, I demonstrate how (Fairtrade) consumption occurs in the course of pursuing organised social practices and why dispositions towards Fairtrade goods do not emerge abstractly but are grounded in

individuals' experiences and already-existing commitments. In so doing, I highlight the importance of paying attention to the role that collective structures, institutional frameworks and systems of provision play in shaping the 'choices' that people are able to make. A theory of practice approach moves us away from viewing Fairtrade and sustainable consumption as purely a matter of individual choice and rather acknowledges how consumption is deeply embedded within a wide network of social relations that will be difficult to influence through the provision of information alone.

This paper will begin with a brief outline of the central features of a theory of practice approach arguing that this perspective offers a powerful lens through which to consider what motivates and sustains consumption behaviour. I then present the 'careers' of four dedicated Fairtrade supporters showing how the paths into Fairtrade consumption are informed by a range of commitments, and how the actions and activities of Fairtrade supporters reproduce and expand this practice. With its close focus on the ways in which individuals learn about and pursue their support of Fairtrade, the reader will learn why the image of the Fairtrade supporter as an individual and choosy 'citizen-consumer' fails to provide a convincing basis on which to understand the practice of Fairtrade support.

### **Sustainable consumption and theories of practice**

Warde (2005) has expressed his surprise that theories of practice have not been systematically applied to the field of consumption given their promise in other areas of the social sciences. Theories of practice are diverse but they are generally associated with the writings of Bourdieu (1990), Giddens, (1984) and Schatzki, (1996; 2001). The main theme that runs through these works is the belief that social action is neither determined by the free choices of rational actors nor is it completely constrained by social forces and norms. Rather practice theory, like other cultural theories, stresses the importance of the

pre-existence of shared or collective cognitive and symbolic structures of knowledge which enable people to interpret the world and behave in particular ways (Reckwitz, 2002). A practice is:

“a routinised way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood [...] It is a ‘type’ of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales, and at different points of time and is carried out by different bodies and minds” (ibid: 250)

A practice, therefore, is a co-ordinated entity (such as ways of consuming or working) which consists of “doings and sayings” that are linked together by understandings, procedures or rules, and engagements (Warde, 2005: 134). These ideas have already been explored in relation to sustainable consumption by Southerton et al (2004) who argued that attempts to change people’s consumer behaviour ought to focus on how routine practices are mediated by social institutions and technical infrastructures rather than on individualistic approaches that emphasise personal choice.

An important starting point for developing a theory of practice approach to consumption is to recognise that consumption “is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice” (Warde, 2005: 137). In carrying out a practice, we will often be required to use things/goods in a particular way and how we understand and actually use these things will be guided by the organisation of the practice rather than any personal decision about consuming. So, for example, if we want to understand Fairtrade consumption we must look at the wider practices of Fairtrade support (such as engagement in a Fairtrade network or development organisation) which are likely to generate desires for Fairtrade goods. Whilst this seems to create a constrained image of consumption which is wholly determined by the organisation of a social practice, this is not the case because not everyone will engage in a practice with the same degree of competency or commitment. Practices are “internally differentiated on many dimensions” (ibid: 138). Thus the ability to demonstrate support for Fairtrade is likely to

depend upon an individual's knowledge of the aims of the Fairtrade movement and their opportunities for learning about them, having access to Fairtrade products and the available resources (both money and time), previous ethical consumer behaviour, knowing other people who support Fairtrade, and so on. Whilst Bourdieu (1984) was also concerned with the differentiation of consumption, he tended to attribute differences to external, transposable dispositions and structural determinants such as social class, rather than paying attention to how the organisation of practices results in their internal differentiation (Sassatelli, 2007: 107).<sup>1</sup>

Echoing the ideas presented in classical ethnographical work on subcultures (Becker, 1963; Willis, 1978), it is suggested that once an individual is recruited into a practice, their "subsequent immersion... has the features of a career" (Warde, 2005: 145). So it is through pursuing organised practices of Fairtrade support that dispositions and orientations towards Fairtrade consumer goods develop rather than consumption being the result of individuals exercising personal choice. Therefore, as individuals engage in the practice of Fairtrade support they are reproducing this practice in a manner that is neither fully conscious nor reflexive. They are likely to be oriented by their past experiences which have enabled routinised ways of 'doing and saying' to develop and they are likely to be influenced by the multiplicity of social practices they are, at any one time, engaged in. Whilst existing accounts of Fairtrade consumption have tended to assume that decisions to purchase Fairtrade goods are fully reflexive and boundless, we will learn, in the narratives that follow, how a Fairtrade supporters' reflexivity is bounded and shaped by the distinct social contexts they are operating within.

### **Fairtrade supporters' narratives**

The data presented in this paper has been drawn from a wider project on Fairtrade consumption and support within a Fairtrade town (a place where there is a community of

active Fairtrade supporters), Fairville<sup>2</sup>, in which the author conducted in-depth semi-structured household interviews with both Fairtrade and non-Fairtrade supporters (Author, 2010). Respondents were asked to discuss a recent shopping visit with the aid of a shopping receipt, which not only provided a record of actual purchases made during a specific shopping trip but also encouraged respondents to reflect upon their shopping routines – the places, spaces, times and products – as well as the types of issues that tended to influence their consumption 'choices'. If a respondent highlighted a particular issue of concern to them, for example Organic food, vegetarianism or Fairtrade, the opportunity was taken to delve deeper into their levels of commitment to these types of consumer good considering the degree to which their interest spanned beyond shopping into other areas of their life. In addition, because the wider project involved a selection of research methods, including participant observation of the Fairtrade Town groups' activities and events, it was possible to gain insight into the wider involvement of participants in practices of Fairtrade support. The Fairtrade supporters who feature as the case studies in this paper were connected with the local Fairtrade town group but have been chosen because they have differential levels of commitment to this network and the wider practice of Fairtrade support. In this way, the cases reveal the diversity and internal differentiation of the practice of being a Fairtrade supporter.

### Alfred

Alfred is a 70-year old<sup>3</sup> retired NHS Catering Manager who spent much of his working life as a chef on ocean cruise-liners. Consequently he has travelled extensively and has seen first hand the poverty in many tourist destinations. From a young age, Alfred became interested in politics and he joined the Communist Party in his 20s, and was involved with the labour movement whilst working on the ships. He is an active Trade Union Council member and is presently the secretary for the local group in Fairville. He

also supports the Co-operative movement and is on the board of the Fairville Co-op society. He does all of his food shopping at the Co-op as "a matter of principle". Alfred is a social campaigner and has been involved in a *very* long list of local campaigns including fighting to save a ward at a local hospital and supporting the actions of striking bus drivers who had been sacked. He has boycotted South African products in the past and continues to boycott Esso Oil and products from Israel.

Alfred is a very committed Fairtrade supporter who initiated the campaign for Fairville to become a Fairtrade town. His decision to become involved with Fairtrade came after a faith-based group sold Fairtrade products at an annual Trade Union rally. He learnt about Fairtrade there and pursued his interest in subsequent years. He says:

*I think it first arose when some neighbours up the road offered to do a Traidcraft stall at a May rally of the Trades Council many, many years ago, and they came for two or three years. Then it sort of dropped off the horizon really but then through reading various literature and the Ethical Consumer and a whole number of other things I suppose, the Fairtrade concept came into my consciousness. And I knew we should be doing something about it and I suppose I was buying Fairtrade for years and then I raised the whole issue at the Trades Council and that's how I really got involved*

It is interesting to note that Alfred's involvement in Fairtrade stemmed from his engagement in the Trades Union Council and local Co-operative movement which are both traditionally understood as working-class associations. Existing research has suggested that middle-class consumers are more likely to consume Fairtrade than their working-class counterparts (Adams & Raisborough, 2008; Tallontire et al, 2001; Varul, 2008). Having said this, Pirote has argued that socio-economic status alone is insufficient when predicting the likelihood of an individual consuming Fairtrade and points out that an individual's level of engagement in social and political campaign groups and attitudes towards development are equally important (Pirote, 2007). Indeed Alfred, as a self-defined member of the working class, was keen to stress that social class is not relevant and that anyone can be a Fairtrade consumer as long as they possess a

“social conscience” (a popular refrain amongst Fairtrader supporters), which for Alfred is developed through engagement in political and social campaigns.

There are two important implications of Alfred's belief that there is no necessary relationship between Fairtrade consumption and social class. Firstly, his assertion of the non-exclusivity of Fairtrade consumption can perhaps be understood with reference to the wider organisation of Fairtrade support, which aims to encourage as many people as possible to consume Fairtrade in order to achieve the maximum benefit to Fairtrade producers. Those who are involved in Fairtrade Town networks are joined together in a collective movement that celebrates and promotes Fairtrade through the organisation of Fairtrade events and local campaigning activities. These quasi-religious networks are guided by the Fairtrade Foundation (FTF) in the UK who discursively construct and appeal to the all-inclusive category of the 'consumer' in campaigning material aimed at already-committed Fairtrade supporters, at the same time as encouraging mainstream retailers to shift product-lines to Fairtrade (Author, 2010). Alfred, as a key actor in the Fairville campaign group, is engaged in the active promotion of Fairtrade in Fairville and therefore his commitment to this practice (with its institutional frameworks, collective structures and infrastructures of provision) is shaping his understanding of Fairtrade consumption as something that 'anyone' can do regardless of their social class.

Secondly, Alfred's suggestion that he, and others, have developed a “social conscience” through their activities with the Trade Union and other campaigning groups reveals how these organised practices have created particular dispositions which steer individuals towards Fairtrade. Sayer has argued that an individual's ethical dispositions are embodied in the habitus and that their strength will depend upon “the frequency with which they are activated” (Sayer, 2005: 44-5). An individual's past experiences and how often they engage in 'moral activities' (in other words activities that require them to act



upon their moral emotions) are important in the development of dispositions towards Fairtrade support.

Indeed, Alfred clearly understands his involvement in the Fairtrade campaign as an extension of an already-existent campaigning identity. He explains:

*You know, it's a direct benefit, I mean, I think I may have said to you before, that we've been involved in many campaigns but every day you have a cup of Fairtrade coffee or drink some Fairtrade tea or eat a Fairtrade banana, you're a winner. So you get a little victory every day and that's got to be good. It's good for me and it's good for the producers. And I think that's very important actually because you know, we do need these little victories, these little boosts to keep us going. (Laughs). It's quite simple really.*

Alfred has a very long history of campaigning in which he admits he's "lost more than I've won", but by consuming Fairtrade he is able to re-imagine this history and have a "victory every day". We see elements of what Soper (2008) calls 'alternative hedonism' in this statement, as Alfred professes a sense of moral pleasure in knowing his consumption is making a difference. Soper suggests that new forms of ethical consumption should be understood and promoted, not as purely altruistic acts but as practices which provide consumers with new forms of desire. Both self-interested and altruistic motives combine in different ways challenging the supposed individualism of economic approaches to consumer behaviour. Indeed, a number of Fairtrade supporters described how consuming Fairtrade gave them a "warm glow" or a sense of pride in knowing that their shopping choices were "doing good". However, this 'warm feeling' did not persuade every Fairtrade supporter to buy Fairtrade if the product itself was perceived to be of a lower quality. Indeed Alfred's wife, June, jokingly remarked

*Alfie will buy Fairtrade and eat Fairtrade even if he doesn't like it (Laughs). But I won't.*

(June, age 76, retired secondary school teacher)

Whilst, for Alfred, consuming Fairtrade is important, regardless of the quality of the product, for the majority of respondents ethics could not override their desire for value-for-money and quality.

It is fair to say that Alfred is one of the most committed Fairtrade supporters in Fairville. He strongly believes in Fairtrade and spends much of his free time trying to expand the movement both locally within Fairville and beyond. He organises events in neighbouring towns to encourage them to work towards Fairtrade status, speaks with local suppliers to get them to stock Fairtrade, and is the secretary of the Fairville Fairtrade Action Group. Alfred's performance of the practice of Fairtrade support extends beyond merely buying Fairtrade products in his own shopping and moves into activities to encourage others to buy Fairtrade. For example, through campaigns to shift systems of collective provision which encourage shops and public places in Fairville to stock only Fairtrade, Alfred's actions work to both reproduce and extend the practice of Fairtrade consumption by making Fairtrade products more widely available removing the need for consumers to make an active 'choice' in favour of Fairtrade. But there is also a sense in which Alfred is able to draw upon these newly created networks around Fairtrade in order to promote and extend his other commitments. Alfred regularly sends emails to Fairtrade supporters to promote Trade Union and Co-operative events suggesting that engagement with Fairtrade provides him with sources of social capital that he can make use of in his pursuit of other social and political campaigns. Being a Fairtrade supporter both extends existing commitments into new arenas and provides opportunities to revitalise and promote those existing commitments.

### Phillipa

Phillipa is a 60-year old Christian charity worker and is a regular member of the Fairville Fairtrade Town group – she is not involved in the steering committee but occasionally attends meetings and pays subscriptions. She works as an administrator for a Christian charity which organises social events for youth groups as a way of introducing young people to Christianity. She has been a volunteer and latterly paid employee at this charity

for 25 years, and prior to this, she worked for the homeless charity, Shelter, and for a publishing company. She has three grown-up children and her husband is a vicar at a local church. Phillipa does not have a car because she is concerned about carbon emissions and has chosen to do her shopping online but admits "it's a constant anxiety" knowing whether she's actually reducing her emissions by having her food delivered. She regularly buys local and organic food as well as Fairtrade (and indeed admits that Organic is more important to her than Fairtrade) and actively avoids Tesco because of its aggressive policies. She prefers Waitrose believing it to be "the most ethical supermarket". She uses the Traidcraft stall at her local church for many of her basic Fairtrade goods, but admits that she "wouldn't restrict [her] shopping because of Fairtrade, but would try and buy Fairtrade if it was an obvious sort of thing". This is an important point to highlight, because despite the fact that she counts herself as a Fairtrade supporter, she does not always consume Fairtrade goods. Indeed, a number of Fairtrade supporters whom I spoke with also adopted a more flexible approach to their Fairtrade shopping (buying Fairtrade only in some cases) suggesting that consuming Fairtrade products is not the only way to 'do' Fairtrade support.

Phillipa found it hard to remember exactly how she learnt about Fairtrade but places her first interest in the 1960s:

*I don't know why, it was that sort of period; we just were emerging into married life at a time when Amnesty International and Fairtrade were opening. Yeab, so it was I think I was just that generation you know. And erm, it wasn't particularly around before. [...] I think it was just that that's what came out of you know, people like me who were young in the 60's, all those sort of things were terribly important at the time.*

Phillipa describes the importance of this political-cultural moment and how her involvement in particular protest movements sparked her initial interest in Fairtrade. This interest increased when her local church asked her to run a Traidcraft stall which she did as a hobby whilst her children were young, nearly 30 years ago. Additionally through her involvement with the church – which is involved in missionary work

providing funding for a pharmacy in Kenya – Phillipa has met some Kenyan tea producers who have told her of some of the difficulties they face producing their crop which has encouraged her to believe that “buying [food] from a responsible supplier seems about the safest thing you can do”.

Just as Alfred understood his involvement as closely linked to his personal history of engagement in social and political campaigns, Phillipa understands her support for Fairtrade as closely linked to her faith.

*Oh well, it's hugely, because you know, my faith is what motivates everything else in my life, so it's bound to be. Erm, and it's interesting therefore to, with people like my cousins who are erm, I mean they both come from incredibly Christian backgrounds, but they absolutely have abandoned any idea of faith themselves. And so, how much of their hugely ethical stance on things is to do with their background and therefore comes out of a sort of Christian tradition. Erm, but on the other hand actually, you know, erm, I think that, yes, I think in my case it's hugely motivated by my faith. But, on the other hand, I wouldn't say that there's any sense in which Christians have a monopoly on ethics. [...] It just happens in my case. Probably if I didn't have any faith I'd be absolutely foul, so it's just as well (laughs).*

Importantly, we again see how past experiences and commitments seem to orient people towards Fairtrade options and ethical lifestyles, rather than it being the case that individuals automatically choose to consume Fairtrade because they have been educated about its benefits. Whilst religious motivations are clearly personally important to Phillipa, she is also keen to stress that you don't have to be a Christian to be a Fairtrade supporter. Just as Alfred denied any necessary association between social class and Fairtrade and characterised the Fairtrade supporter as someone who held a “social conscience”, Phillipa also suggests that the possession of particular ethical dispositions is likely to influence individuals towards Fairtrade support.

Although Phillipa rejects the necessary association between faith and Fairtrade, she was unique amongst Fairtraders in Fairville in representing her ability to consume Fairtrade in class terms.

*I think there is a sort of middle-classness about it and I think that erm, it's more expensive, so you also have to be able to say I can afford to do that. And I've got this friend who doesn't buy Fairtrade and only has £20 for her food bill and she was very poor in her*

*childhood and so she's never lost that erm, habit in her shopping, so she would never buy organic and she certainly wouldn't buy Fairtrade and she absolutely gets hot and bothered when people talk about the planet; she couldn't give a blah about the planet because her concern is about just keeping her head above water and so she can get quite cross about Fairtrade. She sees it as a sort of gloss on the cake of middle-class morality. Erm, and one has to be quite cautious about it. So I think that there is a sense in which it's fine for people like me now, when, we're both in work and our children are grown up and we may not, we're obviously not earning a lot of money, but erm, but we can afford to choose what we buy [...]so I think there's bound to be a sort of middle class element to it. Erm, but...of course there's an element also where it's easier to buy Fairtrade, if you're not actually hugely rich. I mean, if I were hugely rich I might have a four wheel drive car and drive to the supermarket, I don't know (Laughs). It's just that I can have a concern because it all fits in quite easily, but you know, if in fact, my husband went everywhere by helicopter, I don't know if I'd still feel the same, perhaps I wouldn't. I'd hate to, I wouldn't like to say you know, whatever happened I'd always have the same concern, because I don't know that I would. I'd probably be thinking about my next Dior outfit and going to a spa or something (Laughs). It's a bit inevitable that people like me will be able to be erm...*

Phillipa here seems acutely aware that Fairtrade consumption may not be open to everyone and suggests that there are clear class/income and lifestyle limits to the practice. In drawing a distinction between her own lifestyle and consumption practices, she imagines how those with greater or lesser incomes and different lifestyle concerns would behave. The exclusivity of Fairtrade consumption is revealed in her statement, with those in higher status groups slightly denigrated for their engagement in conspicuous and environmentally damaging forms of consumption. Interestingly, Phillipa does not set up a stark opposition between herself as an ethical consumer and the 'other' as an un-ethical consumer, but uses the opportunity to reflect upon her own involvement in Fairtrade practices. She describes her own involvement as "inevitable" and reveals how Fairtrade "fits in" to her other concerns quite easily. Whilst social class and stage in the life-course are viewed as crucial to her likelihood of consuming Fairtrade, just as important are her previous experiences which reveal a long career of involvement in and commitment to Fairtrade and similar practices (for example running a Traidcraft stall, buying Organic food). She imagines that if she operated in a different world where she were "rich" or only had £20 to spend on food, she would not necessarily be interested in Fairtrade. Her reflections upon the contexts which have

shaped her own dispositions towards Fairtrade have made her sensitive to the possibility that not everyone will be equally concerned to consume Fairtrade. She seems to realise that her own and other people's consumption practices have a "bounded reflexivity" (Sassatelli, 2007) operating within the conditions in which they find themselves.

Phillipa is not quite as committed as Alfred to extending the practice of Fairtrade consumption and support. She does not see herself as a campaigner and describes supporting Fairtrade as "a pain free way of doing one's bit". Although she does not think of herself as an active campaigner, more of an "armchair supporter", she has contacted several local stores in Fairville to ask them to stock Fairtrade and supports the Fairville Fairtrade town group through membership subscriptions. As the Fairtrade movement has organised itself into the mainstream, Phillipa feels that being a Fairtrade supporter has become easier and that it doesn't need "people like me pottering about with their stall". For Phillipa, as the Fairtrade movement has grown the practice of being a Fairtrade supporter has changed and she has adapted to these changes. This is an interesting point because it reveals how established ways of supporting Fairtrade have altered along with the shifting cultural and economic context of Fairtrade.

#### Claire and John

Claire and John are in their mid-30s and have been married for 12 years. They have two young children, a girl aged four and a boy aged seven. They have been Fairtrade supporters for the last nine years, and despite not being directly involved in the local network, the couple always make a point of asking for Fairtrade when shopping and have handed in 'stock-it' postcards to local stores as part of a national Fairtrade campaign. Claire is currently taking a break from work to raise their children but used to be a Maths and P.E. teacher at a local secondary school and John works full-time for an IT firm. They visit the local market for fresh produce, buy their toiletries from the Co-op

(because these have not been tested on animals) and use Asda for the rest of their shopping. They are both vegetarians but for different reasons; for Claire it was a desire not to be implicated in the harm of animals, whilst John wanted to reduce his consumption of world resources. They both enjoy using charity shops for clothing and other goods and see this as a way of helping others through their shopping.

Claire and John have diverging understandings of and motivations for supporting Fairtrade which can perhaps be understood if we look at their trajectory or 'career' as Fairtrade supporters. Whilst both Claire and John came into contact with Fairtrade through John's involvement with the local Oxfam group, they have pursued their interest in differing organisations and through different practices which have provided distinctive contexts they have drawn upon to realise their Fairtrade support. John has continued to pursue his support for Fairtrade through his involvement with the Oxfam group and has also learnt about Fairtrade through his membership of the World Development Movement (WDM), from which he receives information and calls to action about Fairtrade and wider development issues. On the other hand, for Claire, contact with Fairtrade has mostly come through her involvement in her church which engages in charitable outreach work (such as sending clothes and toys to children in the Third World, and organising food parcels for families in Romania) and through doing the weekly shopping where Fairtrade purchases are made. This interesting exchange between the couple reveals their different takes on the purpose of supporting Fairtrade and draws on wider political debates and ideologies about Fairtrade.

**Claire:** *It's a charity isn't it? I'd see it as giving weekly money to charity.*

**John:** *I wouldn't say it's a charity.*

**Claire:** *Wouldn't you?*

**John:** *No. If I buy a fish from the Fishmonger's it's not charity. It's business.*

**Claire:** *But it's not Fairtrade. We're talking about Fairtrade[*

**John:**

*[Its business[*

**Claire:**

*[When I buy*

*vegetables or whatever I see it as I give the money to charity each week, in effect you're giving it to the producer aren't you?*

*John: If it wasn't Fairtrade the producer would still get the money*

*Claire: Yeah, but it's getting a fair price for a producer.*

*John: So you think that's charity that they should...get the fair price? [bemused laughter]*

*Claire: Yeah, because it's a charity as in helping someone.*

*John: But they should be getting it anyway. Shouldn't they get a fair price anyway?*

*Claire: They should, yeah.*

*John: So it's not charity.*

*Claire: No, well, that's how I see it, yeah, a way of helping.*

For Claire, who purchases the majority of the Fairtrade food for the household, the extra cost of Fairtrade products is thought of as a form of charitable giving. Whilst she acknowledges that she is aiming to help producers get a "fair price" she sees this as an extension of the other activities she's involved with which work to "help others". This financial exchange involves her using her relative privilege to help others rather than participating in an equal trading relationship. However, John appears to be drawing on the discursive resources of the trade justice organisations, Oxfam and WDM, which stress the concepts of 'trade not aid' and producer empowerment through 'fair exchange', in order to construct his understanding of, and reasons for supporting, Fairtrade. As a member and supporter of these various trade justice organisations, he adapts the established forms of knowledge, the 'doings and sayings', within these practices and applies them to Fairtrade support. For John, Fairtrade is an important way of alleviating poverty for Third World producers and a business-model which gives producers 'dignity'. The rather heated exchange between the couple reveals the internal differentiation of being a Fairtrade supporter and how individuals can have and develop different motivations for, and understandings of, engaging in the practice. Whilst Fairtrade support can be used as a source of commonality between individuals, for this couple it appears to be a source of conflict; and in more ways than one, as I show.

Claire has the main responsibility for the household shopping – a trend reflected in numerous studies on the gender division of labour in the household (Miller, 1998; Pahl, 2000). When discussing her most recent shopping visit she pointed out that sometimes



she does not buy Fairtrade because of a desire to support local produce and the extra cost (both environmental and monetary) of Fairtrade. For Claire, there was a need to balance a number of competing concerns and take account of both ethical issues and practical matters of buying food for the family at a reasonable price that will last them for the week. However, John later voices a different opinion about the way he would approach Fairtrade shopping if he did it.

*John: If something's Fairtrade I don't tend to look at the price. I bought some Muesli from there once, it was quite expensive actually.*

*Claire: What was it?*

*John: Fairtrade, Fairtrade muesli.*

*Claire: Perhaps we need to have a conversation about how much we should spend really. I start looking at prices thinking 'oo you know', I don't know I just look at prices, whereas you said if it's Fairtrade you don't tend to look at it.*

John's opinions on the cost of consuming Fairtrade relative to non-Fairtrade goods seems to be based on his occasional experiences of carrying out the weekly shopping. Claire is more sensitive to the price of Fairtrade goods and seems to be guided by established ways of 'doing' the weekly shop to ensure the varied needs of her family are met. Claire is steered away from the more expensive Fairtrade items because she is pursuing a different social practice when she is shopping for her family. When she can both support Fairtrade and nourish her family, when the "norms of different practices are consistent with each other" (Warde, 2005: 144), she fulfils her commitment to both. But when these norms clash, she seems to prioritise her commitment to her family. On the other hand, whilst there is no doubt that John is just as committed to his family as Claire, because the practice of household shopping is not an arena in which he expresses this commitment, he sees no real problem with consuming the often more expensive Fairtrade options. This is in keeping with research by Pahl (2000) on the gendering of spending within the household who showed that women tend to be responsible for the

collective expenditure of households, whereas men are more preoccupied with individual expenditure.

Claire and John provide just one illustration of the difficulties felt by all respondents in the wider study (Fairtraders and non-Fairtraders) of negotiating competing demands and balancing ethical, practical and family preferences when shopping. Debates around new forms of consumer-citizenship and discourses promoting Fairtrade suggest that consumers are increasingly using their individual consumption to 'vote' for fairer trade; but in many ways I found just as many 'votes' for unfair trading relations. Because Fairtrade supporters admitted that they did not always buy Fairtrade and instead prioritised other concerns such as price, quality, and competing ethical consumer products like Organic and local food, we are encouraged to question the importance, or *not*, of consuming Fairtrade products for being a Fairtrade supporter, especially in light of the fact that people are increasingly unknowingly consuming Fairtrade because of collective provisioning policies within supermarkets and towns (Malpass et al, 2007; Author, 2010). For most Fairtrade supporters what it means to be a Fairtrade supporter extends beyond individual shopping choices. Often the actions of Fairtrade supporters in Fairtrade town networks work to encourage others to learn about Fairtrade – like organising events such as Fairtrade fashion shows and Fairtrade coffee mornings, and giving gifts that are Fairtrade to promote awareness; or work to remove the choice of non-Fairtrade products from the shelves through campaigns to shift systems of collective provision – like 'stock it' postcards requesting that local stores and spaces provide Fairtrade options. All these actions extend the practice of Fairtrade support to other interested individuals and create a *collective* practice of which individual consumption is merely one part. For Claire and John and Alfred and Phillipa, buying Fairtrade products is an important part of the practice of Fairtrade support, but through

looking at the range of other activities they engage in, we can see that consumption is not the only, or even the main, way to 'do' Fairtrade support.

### **Conclusions: Returning to a theory of practice**

*I wouldn't say I woke up one morning and decided to be involved [with Fairtrade]*  
(Jenny, age 42, Youth worker)

The case studies presented in this paper and the above quotation from a committed Fairtrade supporter highlight the importance of viewing Fairtrade consumption through a model of practice approach. Existing accounts of Fairtrade consumption which rely on an abstract image of the reflexive citizen-consumer who suddenly becomes aware of injustices in the global trading system and seeks to use their individual consumer power to 'vote' for fairer trading relations do not pay enough attention to how this reflexivity emerges or to how differing levels of commitment to Fairtrade lead to the internal differentiation of the social practice of Fairtrade support. In addition, the narrow focus on consumption ignores the fact that consuming Fairtrade is not necessarily the only, or indeed the most important, way to 'do' Fairtrade support.

I have demonstrated how an individual's awareness of, and engagement with, Fairtrade often emerges whilst they are pursuing their existing commitments. The Fairtrade supporters in this paper had all learnt about Fairtrade through their involvement in existing social networks, for example at their local church, Oxfam group, Co-operative movement and Trades Council; and their dispositions towards Fairtrade have been closely connected to this initial interest. Clarke et al reached similar conclusions in their article on the political rationalities of Fairtrade consumption where they suggested that people who engage in Fairtrade activities "do not do so by recognising themselves as consumers but rather use consumption practices to express existing commitment to various ethical and political projects" (Clarke et al, 2007b: 594). However, I believe it is a mistake to understand the relationship between Fairtrade support and involvement in

existing networks as a one-way relationship. It is not the case that Fairtrade supporters only understand their engagement in Fairtrade activities as part of what it means to be a good Christian or as an expression of their commitment to the Co-operative movement, but rather being a Fairtrade supporter becomes a unique practice in itself which feeds into and modifies existing practices and commitments. For example, being a Fairtrade supporter can provide individuals with sources of social capital that can be made use of in the pursuit of other political and social campaigns. What it now means to support co-operation feeds into and draws upon what it means to be a Fairtrade supporter.

Fairtrade support is a collective practice; an alternative culture which allows its participants to attach meaning to their everyday actions and ways of life. This culture provides a shared language for a group of individuals who often come from quite diverse networks, many of them faith-based networks. This quasi-religious culture is organised around the promotion and celebration of Fairtrade and is differentiated on a number of dimensions. Whilst individuals may learn about Fairtrade in similar ways (with the church being the most likely in Fairville), they do not necessarily pursue their involvement in identical ways nor do they explain their support of Fairtrade in the same way. Individuals who engage in the practice of Fairtrade support do so with differing degrees of commitment for its development and reproduction and with diverse motivations. Paying attention to an individual's trajectory or 'career' within the practice can often account for these differentiated "understandings, procedures and engagements" (Warde, 2005: 134).

We can clearly see that Fairtrade supporters engage in ethical reflection and reflexively monitor and adjust their actions (Phillipa's account was particularly rich in this respect), but this does not mean that an individual's support of Fairtrade is a completely conscious choice. Past engagement in political and social campaign groups, and faith networks were understood by Fairtrade supporters as an important way of developing particular ethical dispositions, or the 'social conscience', which then made them more

likely to be drawn towards Fairtrade. Equally important were the existence of cultural resources, such as the discursive resources drawn upon by John in his discussion of why he supported Fairtrade, which guide how people are able to think about and represent Fairtrade. Reflexivity is not a free-floating, boundless capacity but emerges in specific cultural and material conditions and is performed by agents whose dispositions towards Fairtrade are deeply entrenched and embodied.

By considering how Fairtrade support occurs in practice, we are forced to ask how important the act of consuming Fairtrade is to this practice. An individual can consume Fairtrade without being a Fairtrade supporter (because of shifting systems of collective provision that make Fairtrade purchases the standard option in particular places and retail outlets<sup>4</sup>), and an individual can count themselves as a Fairtrade supporter without always consuming Fairtrade. 'Doing' Fairtrade support is not achieved by individual shopping 'choices' alone but rather involves participating in a wide range of activities— like campaigning to shift systems of collective provision, organising events to promote Fairtrade, giving Fairtrade gifts – of which individual consumption was merely one part. People are oriented by a number of different social practices which made always shopping for Fairtrade impractical or irrelevant. Competing ethical labels, family concerns, price and quality were all factors that made Fairtrade options less appealing. This paper has revealed that people are often not consistent – or at least they struggle hard to be so.

In light of this, interventions that are aimed at changing individual shopping choices for sustainability or social justice reasons need to move away from individualised models of behavioural change that assume that the only thing that prevents people from acting more responsibly is a lack of information. Education and awareness-raising exercises are unlikely, on their own, to be successful because our consumer behaviour is not driven by wholly rational and reflexive action but is emotionally, normatively and

collectively defined in the course of pursuing social practices. Therefore, strategies for changing patterns of consumption must act on the collective level and seek to transform social practices rather than focusing on the individual level of consumer choice. Recent moves towards collective Fairtrade provisioning policies in retail outlets and public spaces (many of which are led by the Fairtrade Towns movement) can be seen as a step in the right direction towards this objective. However, it is important to remember that outsiders to the practice of Fairtrade support may have very different understandings of and dispositions towards Fairtrade goods. Just because systems of collective provision are switched to Fairtrade it does not follow that this is alone enough to transform the complex and embedded norms and conventions of established social practices.

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<sup>1</sup> However, Bourdieu did hint at the importance of the internal differentiation of practices in *Distinction*, for example, his discussion of the meaning of sporting practices revealed how past experience, as well as the type of team, the place and the equipment etc. used were likely to differentiate the practice (Bourdieu, 1984: 211).

<sup>2</sup> The Fairtrade town has been given the fictional name 'Fairville' to protect the anonymity of respondents

<sup>3</sup> Reader should note all ages refer to ages of respondents at the time of the interview during March-July, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the 'accidental Fairtrade consumer', see Author (2010)