
ARTICLES

Voices Unheard: The Psychology of Consumption in Poverty and Development

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Many facets of contemporary global problems posed by poverty pertain to the deprivation of consumption capability and are within the consumer psychologist's expertise domain. This article (based on my 2004 Presidential Address to the Society for Consumer Psychology [SCP]) outlines how consumer psychology research can contribute an understanding of the cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural dimensions of poverty, and how poverty depletes and alters the human need and capacity to consume. Consumer psychology research can also help suggest the nature and function of material and psychological interventions that can help ameliorate these conditions, focusing their design and monitoring their effects. These are important research priorities for consumer psychologists and deserve more and sustained attention from our community. Apart from garnering voice in policy conversations in government, industry, and academe, such research eventually will enhance our field's substantive contribution to improving the contemporary human condition.

I wish I could say that I discovered it myself, but one of Amartya Sen's (1984) articles drew my attention to William James' observation: "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook" (see James, 1890: 1950 Dover edition, Volume 2, p. 369). The remark is quite a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it truly simplifies the task of being wise, since inadvertent oversight and thoughtful discrimination are often hard to distinguish *ex-post*. Indeed, Sen (1984) noted that the remark wisely overlooks so many other aspects of wisdom! And yet, as he further pointed out, it is also the case that what is overlooked in many ways judges what is focused on. This threat of downstream scrutiny may be cause for discomfort for those who choose overlooking as a shortcut to wisdom. The limited literature on the consumer psychology of poverty is a case in point.

As the managerial lexicon fills up with new gerunds and participles such as supply-chaining, open-sourcing, outsourcing, and off-shoring, many, like Tom Friedman (2005), have had an epiphany that the world is flat (or at least flattening). There is talk of a "triple convergence" characterized by a global, Web-mediated playing field that is increasingly level;

new processes and habits for horizontal collaboration; and "a digital, mobile, personal, and virtual connectivity" encompassing the 6-billion-plus citizens of the globe (Friedman, 2005, p. 173). This convergence will allegedly induct 3 billion new players who potentially can contribute to wealth creation in a rapidly globalizing economy. There is the obligatory caveat—perhaps there may be less inclusion than the aggregate numbers suggest. Yet, one might readily infer that consumer psychologists will have a thriving future profiling the emerging consumer culture associated with this new affluence.

The above is, of course, one exuberant prognosis. Yet, there is another more sobering reality regarding these 6 billion global citizens. The World Development Report (2001, p. vi) points out that at Y2K a full 4 billion of these individuals were consigned to what Prahalad (2005) has called the "bottom of the pyramid" (BOP). Of these, 2.8 billion lived on between \$1 and \$2 a day, and another 1.2 billion on less than \$1 a day. In Y2K, the BOP infant mortality rate was at about 6% within a year of birth, and as many as 8 of 100 children did not live to see their fifth birthday. Of every 100 school-age BOP boys, 9 did not go to school. For girls, the number was 14. These figures were accompanied by the disconcerting forecast that, in the next 25 years, the world would add another 2 billion to its population.

Do these statistics bother anyone? Not surprisingly, the answer is yes, and the concern is global. As the last century

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drew to a close, the world community, working together at several United Nations conferences, evolved a number of goals with respect to reducing global poverty and human deprivation. In October 2000, 180 heads of states signed the Millennium Declaration, a pledge to meet a set of eight specific goals embodied as the “Millennium Development Goals” (MDG) for poverty amelioration. These goals, benchmarked to a 1990 starting point, are to be reached by 2015 and serve as “time-bound, outcome-based targets” to focus strategies for their attainment (The World Bank, 2004).

It is instructive to examine the thrust of these goals since they define the broader context in which consumer psychologists can find future research opportunities if we choose to so invest:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger (halve the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day, and halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger).
2. Achieve universal primary education (ensure that boys and girls alike complete primary schooling).
3. Promote gender equality and empower women (eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education).
4. Reduce child mortality (reduce the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds).
5. Improve maternal health (reduce the maternal mortality rate by three-fourths).
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases (reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS).
7. Ensure environmental sustainability (integrate sustainable development into country policies and reverse loss of environmental resources; halve the proportion of people without access to potable water; significantly improve the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers).
8. Develop a global partnership for development (raise official development assistance and expand market access).

The MDG exercise is not without its critics. Some (see *The Economist*, 2005) question whether it has gone beyond spawning bureaucratic overhead in the name of good intentions. However, others (e.g., Sachs, 2005) have provided a compelling analysis of this opportunity to help foster political and economic systems that further human well-being. Sachs (2005, p. 1) wrote about “ending poverty in our time ... more than 8 million people around the world die each year *because they are too poor to stay alive*” [italics mine]. He lays out these economic possibilities: attaining the MDG by 2015; eradicating extreme poverty by 2025; assuring progress up the development ladder in *all* of the world’s poor countries; and accomplishing all this with only modest financial help from the world’s richest countries (for more on the MDG, see also The World Bank, 2001, 2003, 2004).

Sachs discusses the roles and responsibilities associated with global poverty eradication from the macro perspective of development economics. As consumer psychologists, we

probably would choose to participate differently. Yet, the more pertinent question is whether we have participated at all. As the sparse literature base (c.f. Andreasen, 1991) shows, consumption issues surrounding poverty are not a significant part of our discipline’s scholarly portfolio. Does this reflect our wisdom or oversight? And if academic disciplines are judged by their effects on the contemporary human condition, will consumer psychology pass the test? On a positive note, some newer papers (e.g., Hill & Adrangi, 1999), along with those in recent special issues of the *Journal of Macromarketing* (on vulnerable consumers, see Baker et al., 2005; Ringold, 2005) and the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* (on helping consumers help themselves, see Lynch & Wood, 2006), have expanded the literature. These papers, as well as a planned 2008 special issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* devoted to consumer welfare, suggest an awakening of our disciplinary consciousness. Research on these issues deserves more of our attention and involvement now and in the future. As Bono urges in his foreword to Sachs’ book (2005, p. xviii), “We can’t say our generation couldn’t afford to do it. And we can’t say that our generation didn’t have reason to do it. It’s up to us. We can choose to shift the responsibility, or ... we can choose to shift the paradigm.”

In this article, I argue that many facets of contemporary global problems posed by poverty pertain directly to deprivation of consumption (or even the aspiration or the capability to consume). These issues lie well within the consumer psychologist’s expertise. I outline how consumer psychology research can contribute to the understanding, measurement, and analysis of the cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural dimensions of poverty, and how poverty depletes and alters the human need and capacity to consume. I explain how consumer psychologists can suggest the nature and function of material and psychological interventions that can help ameliorate these conditions, focusing their design and monitoring their effects. Often, our extant theoretical and empirical knowledge base can speak directly to these problems. At other times, the necessary shifts in conceptual and empirical focus may extend and enrich our scholarly understanding of the mental constructs and processes that drive consumption behaviors in general, and of the poor, in particular. I believe this is an important research priority for consumer psychologists, one that deserves more and sustained attention from a larger proportion of our talented community. Apart from garnering voice in policy conversations in government, industry, and academe, such research can eventually enhance our field’s substantive contribution to improving the contemporary human condition.

POVERTY: A CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGIST’S PERSPECTIVE

Poverty has many facets, only some of which relate to the lack of physical capital, infrastructure, and other objective economic assets. Indeed, much of the damage from depriva-

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