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# Good Bad Consumption – Paradigm Development of Consumer Research in Finland

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Consumer studies form an interdisciplinary field that has always been connected both with theoretical developments in social and economic sciences and with several practical questions in society, for example, how consumption contributes to welfare, macro-economic growth and market efficiency, how to understand and predict changes in consumers' interests and satisfaction, and how consumer preferences and action can be changed into a socially desirable direction.

In this article I try to reveal some “mental turns” or paradigm shifts that have taken place in consumer research in Finland during the last century, but particularly in the last forty years when I have been closely working with consumer research myself. Similar paradigm turns could possibly be identified in other Nordic countries, too, and thus claimed to be typical of the North European consumer research in general.

This review is skewed towards consumer behavior theory in marketing and sociology, while consumer studies in economics, financing, social history, food sciences, and social and consumer policy will largely be bypassed although they are also important and have inspired marketing and sociology scholars. Each researcher who has published a doctoral dissertation or other major books will be mentioned through reference to his/her dissertation, which often reveals the main field of interest. I hope that the readers will also get hold of their articles.

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Before contemplating the paradigm shifts of the field, a couple of words about public reactions to consumption and consumer behavior in general are in order.

### **1.1. The Good – Bad Controversy**

One main aspect of the way consumption is treated in public discussion and research is the emotional connotations attributed to it. Consumption is often the embodiment of either good or bad things in society, sometimes both; it is seldom treated in neutral tones as, for example, one treats other economic concepts such as income, production or employment.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century consumption was mainly treated as a good thing and associated with modern progress, better living conditions and higher quality of life, something that everyone was striving for. Later on, during the construction of welfare policy, consumption became an ambivalent thing for moral and egalitarian reasons, especially if income and consumption were perceived to be unevenly distributed. Moreover, the necessity of saving and a restricting protestant attitude toward consumption have been strongly rooted in Finnish thinking, and probably also in other Nordic countries. This is due to the extended period of austerity in the 1940's and long after. Also inherited religion-based ascetic ideals are still at work. Urbanization took place rather late in the end of the 1960's, and consequently, at least the older cohorts still mentally live with one foot in the agrarian, self-supporting society. At present times, environmental movements have increased awareness of the harmful effects of consumption, often without specifying which aspects are harmful and which are neutral, or maybe even beneficial. It is thus almost an inborn attitude of the Finnish population that too much consumption is a bad thing.

At the same time, however, it has been fully acceptable to strive for a higher living standard through public spending for example on free schools, child care, medical care, hospitals, and welfare benefits. Public consumption is almost without exception considered morally good because it is associated with human rights, egalitarianism and solidarity in society in contrast to private consumption, which mostly is taken to represent conspicuous consumption, waste and destruction of natural resources. Also, the new green or "de-growth" ideologies attack in the first place private consumption, while there is a strong resistance towards giving up any acquired public benefits and public consumption.

Only lately has this dualistic good-bad confrontation in attitudes toward consumption become somewhat less drastic. Postmodern cultural research has somewhat relaxed prevailing moral attitudes, and given consumers permission to enjoy consumption as a playful experience. Social gatherings, and gaining distinction with the help of consumption such as clothing, music taste and leisure activities are examples of an important part of present-day youth culture. This more permissive attitude penetrates the whole of society. For example, in the last recession in 2008, private consumption was for the first time treated by government and media as something good

and to be encouraged even helping to level off the economic downturn, whereas still in the 1990–1995 depression, restraining from consumption was the commonly approved social norm (Uusitalo 2005).

Over the years consumer research has covered both sides of consumption, good and bad. However, in most economic research the starting assumption is that consumption is a good and desired activity. Consequently, in economic research, the externalities of consumption have been left more or less to the realm of moral discourse instead of careful empirical analysis.

On average, Finnish consumer researchers have on many occasions been earlier in shifting to new theoretical paradigms and methodological approaches than colleagues in other Nordic countries. This has many explanations. One is the strong expansion of universities and business schools, and growth in numbers of doctoral degrees granted in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Finland, which has opened up new paths of interdisciplinary research. Another explanation comes from the many connections of Finnish researchers directly with American consumer research and Central European social research. The contacts to U.S. were built early through the ASLA-Fulbright scholarship system, and several scientists were working at United States universities, where consumer behavior studies became established already in the early 1970's. A similar trend to adopt ideas from American consumer behavior research also took place in other Nordic countries, but maybe somewhat later. Further, the early willingness to paradigm changes can be explained by the close contacts of Finnish social scientists with continental French and German traditions and methodological approaches in social science.

After the Second World War, Finland as a society wanted to catch up with the consumption standards of other Western countries, especially Sweden, which during the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century was our main reference point in income and social policy and consumption patterns. After television spread in the 1970's, the variety of ideal life styles broadened. Consumption-related aspirations were also supported by abundant television and printed advertising. Among the Nordic countries Finland took the most liberal attitude toward advertising and commercial television. This can be seen not only in one of the highest per capita advertising costs in the world, but also in the way prolific advertising has supported a great number of published newspapers and magazines, resulting in – in international comparison – the substantial time spent on daily reading in Finland.

## **2. PREHISTORY OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR STUDIES**

### **2.1. Scarcity and poverty**

Interest in consumer behavior developed alongside the development of the consumer goods industry and markets. In past times households produced their own necessities, and monetary in-

come and choices were limited. The very first empirical consumer studies in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hjelt 1912) focused on worker families in cities and how they could manage their lives under poverty. As Ahlqvist (2010) has shown in her dissertation on the history of consumer statistics and studies, social welfare issues dominated the interest in families' consumer behavior in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It was only after Keynesian ideas started to spread and influence economic policy that consumption was seen as an important element in economic growth, and modeling and predicting consumer demand and saving behavior started to preoccupy also economists on a broader scale. In Finland, however, it was not economists who introduced to the general public the idea that increasing consumer income had positive effects on demand and thus finally benefited the whole economy. It was a social politician, Pekka Kuusi (1961), who published a much debated book on social policy for the 1960's in which he justified a demand-oriented economic policy according to which an improvement in workers' incomes and social welfare benefited the whole society in economic terms.

Before the Second World War consumer studies were more or less sporadic, and only from 1960 onwards do we have more systematic statistics on all types of consumption, not only food. The statistics also covers the whole population and allows comparisons between various population groups (Ahlqvist 2010, 51, Laurila 1985). Still, in gathering data on consumer expenditure in the 1950–60's, the main purpose was to develop reliable cost-of-living and price indexes rather than predicting or understanding the mechanisms of consumer demand and choices (Ahlqvist 2010).

Scarcity and poverty as problems that were targets of the very first consumer studies have not disappeared, but the issue is no more whether daily food intake and housing are satisfying basic needs. Now it comes down to relative poverty, in other words, how fair and justifiable the income distribution is and in which direction it is developing. One can rightfully claim that consumer research in Nordic social sciences has been more occupied with class and income differences than consumer research elsewhere, and this trend seems to be continuing. The background for this interest is found in democratic policies, the history of strong worker unions and, currently, in the aim to maintain what is left of the welfare state and income equality which have shown to be fairly successful in reaching political legitimacy and citizen commitment in all Nordic societies.

The issue of absolute poverty has moved to global level. However, global developments and poverty problems have received only little attention from consumer researchers, who have only few contacts with development economists and global non-governmental organizations. Thus, also in Nordic countries, most consumer researchers work to understand consumer behavior and problems of their own affluent, developed societies. By scarcity is now referred either to relative scarcity or the scarcity of natural resources, consequences that the neglect of collective environ-

mental effects of consumption has brought up. In recent years, relative poverty and equality of income structures have been studied from the macroeconomic point by researchers at the Government Institute for Economic Research VATT, for example Riihelä & Sullström (2006) and Riihelä, Sullström & Tuomala (2010).

## **2.2. Explaining aggregate consumption and saving**

Predicting aggregate demand and saving became a central target of early economic research on consumption from the 1950's and 60's onwards. Already Klaus Waris (1945), who later became the Governor of the Bank of Finland and Chancellor of the Helsinki School of Economics, published in 1945 a study on the incomes, consumption and saving of Finnish households in the 1930's.

Along with the development of econometric models and possibilities to electronically handle large statistical data bases, various demand models became common. Econometric models of explaining aggregate demand and saving, but also expenditures on specific product classes could be tested. For example, Lauri Korpelainen (1967) and Meeri Saarsalmi (1972), the first female professor in economic sciences in Finland, studied the demand of household durables, Juhani Rouhiainen (1979) demand for food items, Sirkka Hämäläinen (1981) consumption vs. saving behavior, and Sinikka Salo (1984) household housing investments. ETLA, The Research Institute of the Finnish economy, and VATT, The Government Institute for Economic Research, conducted over the years a series of studies to estimate the future structure of household expenditures and the income and price elasticity and cross elasticity between various expenditure groups (Marjomaa 1969, H. Hämäläinen 1973, Väisänen 1980, Virén 1983, Suoniemi & Sullström 1995). Alcohol policy required information on the efficiency of various control mechanisms, both supply-side and price measures, and in this econometric modeling was useful (e.g. Nyberg 1967).

Later on it appeared that these kind of aggregate models and expenditure system models were perhaps very useful for macroeconomic forecasts and policy, but not for business planning or in-depth understanding of consumers. The analyses showed general trends of various product classes, but did not indicate exactly what type of products within a product class could become successful. No wonder that management and business schools in countries which had become 'consumer societies' with high discretionary spending (such as the United States) became very interested in consumer research that could improve their understanding of modern consumers as well as improve business firms' capabilities to better meet the variety of preferences, and thus improve their competitive position.

According to my opinion, economists were too committed to neo-classical theory and the assumptions of given preferences and individual rationality; they had distanced themselves too

much from behavioral and social sciences. The introduction of time allocation theory and rational expectations models to the economists' palette did not much change the situation. The formation and changes in consumer preferences remained largely unexplained by the economists. Therefore most consumer behavior researchers since the 1970's came from applied economic sciences such as marketing, economic psychology and economic sociology.

### **3. THE FIRST BEHAVIORAL TURN – COGNITIVE INFORMATION AND DECISION PROCESSES**

The behavioral turn took place as a consequence of developments in the United States, where marketing departments in business schools put their minds to more detailed analyses of consumer information and decision processes from the turn of 1960–70 onwards. Psychological concepts, explanations and measurement scales that had been neglected by economists for so long were spreading among marketing and communication researchers.

In the first phase research was fairly pragmatic and management-oriented, trying to understand consumer response to business parameters (such as price, product quality, promotion and the place of distribution, all used to create a good brand image). The theoretical foundations of the so called parameter theory and the importance of branding in marketing had already been developed in the 1950's by Nordic business economists such as Arne Rasmussen, Gösta Mickwitz and Mika Kaskimies (1958), but the American textbooks by Philip Kotler and others made them pragmatic marketing wisdom worldwide by listing the important parameters by which marketers could influence consumers.

Later on it became evident that understanding which marketing stimuli are important is not enough to understand consumer choices. It is also important to understand how, and through which processes, they are perceived and interpreted by the consumer. Moreover, consumers are not only influenced by rational arguments but also by intuition and feelings. Not only are marketing parameters important but also consumers' own personality, involvement, and social context.

In the behavioral paradigm, the clarity of earlier (economic) consumer choice models was to some degree lost and replaced with a variety of models, for example, behavioristic learning models, probability models of repetitive behavior, and later on, with various versions of multi-attribute attitude and choice models. Consumer information and decision processes were gradually partitioned, and each part analyzed separately. The black box between input stimuli and output behavior was really torn open. All this resulted in a much more detailed and accurate picture of consumer cognitive learning and memory processes, as well as of preference and attitude formation.

Inspiration in the 1970's came from new books and empirical articles by James F. Engel, David T. Kollat & Roger D. Blackwell, Howard Sheth, Francesco Nicosia, John G. Myers, Thomas S. Robertson, Harold Kassarian, Gerard Zaltman, Richard Bagozzi, Russel Belk, James Bettman, and Elizabeth Hirschman, just to mention a few early U.S. scholars who developed consumer behavior as an independent, interdisciplinary research field within marketing.

In contrast to earlier 'consumption research', 'consumer behavior research' differed from the models of rational choice and aggregate demand presented in microeconomics so far. The Association for Consumer Research was founded in the 1970's and new trends and ideas were disseminated in the yearly conferences held in the United States. The North-American consumer behavior tradition was very much oriented towards cognitive psychology and information and decision making processes. Basically, however, the research relied on the same rationality assumptions as in economic theory that consumers form their attitudes individually on the basis of careful evaluation of various product attributes, and use a rational decision rule to choose the best alternative.

The impact of the cognitive psychological tradition can also be seen in the majority of Finnish marketing doctoral dissertations on consumer behavior until present times when the so called cultural approach has partly replaced psychology as the major approach of marketing scholars. Early examples of information and decision process-oriented doctoral dissertations are, for example, Uolevi Lehtinen 1975, Liisa Uusitalo 1977 (licentiate diss.), Kristian Möller 1979, Martti Laaksonen 1987, Mai Anttila 1990, Pirjo Laaksonen 1994, Hannu Kuusela 1992, Pirjo Vuokko 1992, Jouni Kujala 1992, Juha Panula 1993, Anu Raijas 1997, Outi Uusitalo 1998, and Harri Luomala 1998. Moreover, many service-oriented researchers at Hanken have paid attention to consumer perception and preferences of services.

Olli Ahtola (e.g. Mazis, Ahtola & Kippel 1975, Ahtola 1985), who for several years worked at the universities of Florida and Denver, also belonged to this paradigm of cognitive decision processes. However, many of the mentioned researchers turned their interest soon toward other issues than consumer behavior because only few career options were available in consumer behavior.

Regular consumer behavior courses were in the 1980's first started at the Helsinki School of Economics, the predecessor of the Aalto University School of Economics, but consumer researchers there never succeeded to have a chair dedicated to the field. For example, Olli Ahtola's (1993–2010) and Liisa Uusitalo's (1990–2010) professorial Chairs at the Helsinki School of Economics were dedicated generally to marketing and marketing communication rather than to their main interest, i.e. consumer behavior. Also presently, only three universities in Finland have a Chair in the field of consumer theory: University of Jyväskylä, University of Vaasa, and University of Helsinki.

#### 4. THE SECOND BEHAVIORAL TURN – CONSUMPTION AS INDICATOR OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND WAY OF LIFE

An interest in consumer behavior also took place among social scientific studies. In social sciences consumer behavior was studied from a more holistic point of view, examining its social background and distinctiveness as well as its connections to social structures. However, only few sociologists – with the exception of a few cultural anthropologists – focused on consumer behavior before the late 1980's. Earlier, it was only alcohol consumption that gained attention, more or less as a social and regulatory problem (K. Mäkelä 1999).

In the 1970's, during the time of political radicalism in universities, even basic research on consumer behavior was often treated by social scientists as a non-legitimate, commercial topic and part of the capitalistic system of need production and manipulation. Critical sociological analyses were performed on an abstract level (e.g. Ilmonen 1985, 2004), however, without proof from consumer statistics or other empirical findings. Consumer behavior was not yet recognized as an important part of social behavior and social interaction. The interactionist school of sociology (e.g. Ervin Goffman, Herbert Blumer, George Herbert Mead) was weak in Finland, and overshadowed by structural explanations and class theoretical approaches. A gradual change in attitudes towards consumer behavior research came from abroad, mainly from European research, but it was also inspired by Finnish sociologists, such as Allardt (1976), who was interested in society's structural problems and welfare issues, or Roos (1976), who was interested in way of life differences and social distinctions.

Finnish sociology had traditionally close contacts either to the Marxist tradition and its more liberal followers in Britain (e.g. Scott Lash, Zygmund Bauman, Anthony Giddens), or to the Frankfurt critical school and its successors in Germany (e.g. Theodore Adorno, Norbert Elias, Jürgen Habermas, Niklas Luhman, Ulrich Beck, Claus Offe, Gerhard Schultze). Moreover, Finnish sociologists were also inspired by a wide variety of French philosophical and sociological thinkers, several of whom were leaning towards post-structural or post-modern theories (e.g. Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Maffesoli, François Lyotard, Henri Lefebvre, Gabriel Tarde). The most influential for Finnish consumer sociologists were perhaps Pierre Bourdieu (1984) with his theory of social distinction and cultural struggles, Colin Campbell (1987) with his theory on modern, imaginary hedonism, and Georg Simmel (1903) with his theories on emulation, fashion and mental life in metropolises.

Also writers working outside discipline-specific research traditions soon found a response among socially oriented consumer researchers in Finland. Of those I wish to mention especially Fred Hirsch (*The social limits to growth*), Albert O. Hirschman (*Shifting involvements*), Tibor Scitovsky (*The joyless economy*), Jon Elster (*Sour grapes – Studies in the subversion of rationality*),



William Leiss (Social communication in advertising) and George Ritzer (McDonaldization) who, in addition to the earlier mentioned, have inspired my own research. This exemplary sample demonstrates that the geographic marginal position of Finnish researchers has encouraged rather than prevented rapid co-opting of ideas globally.

Although Finnish sociologists, following the footsteps of the above mentioned scholars, finally accepted consumer behavior as a legitimate part of social behavior and a target of research, still only a few empirical studies or doctoral dissertations were conducted on the topic, and consumer sociology seldom appeared as a stream of its own in sociology conferences. The first pioneers in Finland who really did empirical sociological research on consumption patterns and social distinctions based on large statistical data are L.Uusitalo (1979) and Toivonen (1986), both employed by business schools (Helsinki School of Economics and Turku School of Economics).

Toivonen's main work was conducted in the spirit of class theory, but Uusitalo's doctoral dissertation – *Consumption style and way of life* (1979) – questioned not only the previous economic and individualistic explanations of consumption, but also the strict class explanations typical to sociology so far. Her interdisciplinary approach that utilizes both economic and sociological theory was then – and still is – somewhat rare within consumer behavior research. The results showed that social and structural factors are important to understand differences in consumption styles, but that the influence of these factors varies greatly depending on the aspect of consumption under study. The theory of independent individual choice has to be criticized, but also social determinism of consumption has to be rejected.

Moreover, the specification of the relative importance of social background was made facilitated by the fact that the study started by looking at the interconnections between various consumption expenditures and identified the main differences in consumption styles (as also did Bourdieu at the same time in France), and only thereafter attempted to explain them. The study also helped to understand that people do not make their consumption choices for each product class separately, but consumption depends on the way of life consisting of a variety of products and services from various expenditure groups. It showed that consumption can be a structuring force in society and not only the other way around as class theories assume, and that people hold emancipator power and can re-shape their living conditions to meet their aspirations (L.Uusitalo 1979,1998).

As these examples show, consumption was, in sociology, treated within the broader frame of a way of life, social distinction, and class differences, or as a side topic in the study of specific, larger social problems such as income differences, alcohol consumption, food consumption, the great migration from country to cities, depression and unemployment, youth problems, or social change in general (e.g., Hannu Uusitalo 1988, Kortteinen 1982, Roos & Rahkonen 1985, Tuorila 1986, Sulkunen 1992, Falk 1994, Noro 1995, Uusitalo & Lindholm 1995, Gronow 1997, Wilska

1999, Lehtonen 1999, Gronow & Warde 2001, J.Mäkelä 2002, Kajalo 2002, Räsänen 2003, Mäenpää 2005). Consumption as an innovative force and everyday practice has been studied by Pantzar (e.g. Pantzar 1996, 2000, Shove & Pantzar 2005) and the role of women and household organizations in constructing consumer society by Heinonen (1998).

In the 1970's and 1980's the two main lines of consumer studies, ie the psychological decision process-oriented consumer paradigm in marketing, and the sociological studies of consumption patterns as socially determined ways of life, developed rather independently with only a few connections between the traditions. For those who have a foot in both traditions, and, moreover, wish to follow what is going on with the rational choice models in economics, this division of research paradigms has caused some difficulties.

In addition to the academic behavior traditions and the corresponding scholars at many universities and business schools (eg Helsinki and Turku Schools of Economics, Universities of Vaasa, Jyväskylä, Helsinki), another important actor in the field of consumer behavior research in Finland has been the National Consumer Research Centre that was founded in 1990 to improve the knowledge base for consumer policy and consumer well-being in general. It has also served as a doorway to academic research and given job opportunities to newly graduated doctors. The main driving force behind the National Consumer Research Centre has during all its existence been its leader, Eila Kilpiö, whose own background was in home economics (e.g. Sääntti, Otva & Kilpiö 1982). The Consumer Centre has developed both the scientific basis and policy oriented research at the institute. The many researchers who have, over the years been involved, and their publications, can be found at [www.ncrc.fi](http://www.ncrc.fi) (for example, Mika Pantzar, Johanna Leskinen, Anu Raijas, Johanna Varjonen, Päivi Timonen, Eva Heiskanen, Petteri Repo, Ville Aalto-Setälä, Johanna Mäkelä, and Kristiina Aalto, just to mention a few of them).

Also Statistical Central Office of Finland [www.stat.fi](http://www.stat.fi) has been important to consumer research. Since the 1950–60's it has regularly collected consumption expenditure and time use data on Finnish households (Household, Consumption and Time use surveys) and provided authentic, up-to-date reports of expenditure structures and population group differences, as well as developed barometers to measure consumer sentiments on a regular basis. It has published other specific studies on household consumption of energy, mass communication, and leisure & cultural consumption as well as interdisciplinary books on consumer behavior (e.g. Nurmela 1996, Ahlqvist & Raijas 2004, Liikkanen 2009, Ahlqvist et al. 2008).

The closer we come to the present day, the more there is interaction between various paradigms and institutes. Researchers have to find collaborators in order to form project groups and receive funding. Therefore, when approaching the 21<sup>st</sup> century, consumer behavior research started to broaden and cover new societal problems and apply many new theoretical approaches borrowed from a variety of disciplines. Whereas the previous mental paradigm shifts had more

or less a disciplinary origin, the following turn, starting in the 1980's, was more problem-oriented and came into being as a result of worries concerning the environmental impacts of economic growth and consumption.

## 5. ENVIRONMENTAL TURN – THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF CONSUMPTION

The growth period and enjoyment of new product innovations after Second World War austerity and rationing did not last more than twenty years. The oil crises of the 1970's, increasing environmental hazards, and climate change reversed interest, and a wish emerged to re-direct consumption towards a more sustainable path. Therefore it was important to find out which activities caused most problems and what kind of social or economic incentives were needed to prevent or substitute harmful behavior.

Uusitalo (1986a, 1986b) was a kind of pioneer to link consumption patterns and ecological issues. The inspiration and financing came first from abroad, and later on from the Academy of Finland which in the 1970's and 1980's was the only major financer of interdisciplinary innovative research. In 1979, Uusitalo was employed by the Institute for Environment and Society of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (at that time West-Berlin), which had been founded to study social aspects of environmental issues. She started to work on the environmental impacts of consumption patterns, and later on, to study individual rationality and free rider behavior in connection with environmentally relevant choices. In her studies, environment appeared as a typical case of public or collective good that requires cooperation and commitment to social norms from all actors (Uusitalo 1989, 1990a, 1990b).

Johanna Moisander (1986, 1996) at the Helsinki School of Economics went on to studying empirically green values, and determinant s of green choices in transportation behavior. Her essays on green consumerism were the first doctoral dissertation on this topic in Finland (Moisander 2001). The National Consumer Research Centre was also quite early to adopt environment as one of its priority fields; for example, Eva Heiskanen (2000) has studied product life cycles, Päivi Timonen (2002) heuristic rules of consumer choice of detergents, and Niva, J.Mäkelä (2007) and Niva, Mäkelä and Kujala (2004) preferences for natural and functional foods. The Statistical Central Office made extensive broad surveys to collect comparative data for European purposes (e.g. Tulokas 1990, Tanskanen 1997). In sociological departments of universities, environmental research started somewhat later than in business economics. It was inspired very much by the German Ulrich Beck and his theory of the "risk society", ie global technological risks for which no specific quarter can be attributed liability. However, consumer behavior issues were still not specifically emphasized in environmental sociology (e.g. Massa & Sairinen 1991, Massa & Ahonen 2006).

The promising new line of environmental consumer studies came soon to a gradual stop for two reasons. The Finnish economy crashed into a deep depression in 1990–95. This made financial and employment issues the main topics on the public agenda (unemployment figures reaching 18% at their highest). Secondly, due to postmodern tendencies and technology development, theoretical interest had meanwhile also shifted to study consumer behavior as a cultural and symbolic phenomenon. The interest of consumer researchers was directed toward new phenomena on the virtual markets and the network society (e.g. Uusitalo 2001).

Interestingly, a dramatic shift now took place in research methodology, with emphasis on discourse analysis, ethnographic, and other qualitative research methods. A new researcher generation was entering the scene that did not want to combine quantitative and qualitative research but was directly growing up in the spirit of constructionism and interpretative research. The purpose was no more to model, explain, and predict behavior, but rather to understand and reveal its deep cultural meanings.

Management-oriented environmental research (see e.g. Heiskanen 2004) was also sliding downhill after an enthusiastic start, although it was holding on better by changing over to the new cultural methods and by broadening its approach to ethical business issues in general (e.g. Joutsenvirta 2006, Joutsenvirta & Uusitalo 2010, Uusitalo & Joutsenvirta 2009). Moreover, environmental research based on more traditional consumer choice and segmentation models continued, supplemented by studies on the importance of the environment in relation to other product characteristics in consumer choice (Rokka & Uusitalo 2009).

## 6. CULTURAL TURN – THE POWER OF THE SYMBOLIC

No research turn takes place abruptly. Interest in the cultural symbolism and meanings of products, services and practices in their everyday context was already embedded in earlier research on consumption patterns and ways of life, dispersion of product innovations, involvement studies, and studies on green consumption, as well as in interpretative studies of advertising and art reception. These studies were conducted in Finland long before the British and American cultural-theory oriented (marketing) researchers launched the CCT Consumer Culture Theory as an umbrella brand name covering various types of qualitative research on consumption.

In the early phases of the cultural approach, consumers' cultural contexts were better accounted for than in previous studies, but the social research methods used were not yet questioned. For example, the Finnish Academy project on cultural production and consumption (ECOCULT), which started in the late 1980's as a cooperative project between Helsinki School of Economics and Research Centre of Contemporary Culture at the University Jyväskylä, still more or less applied in its consumer studies quantitative consumer surveys and multivariate analyses,

and qualitative interviews of key persons and their interpretation (e.g., Kerttula 1988, Ahola 1995, Takala 1991, Valkeinen & Valsta 1992, Linko 1998, see also a collection in Uusitalo 2008). Combining consumer studies with studies on cultural production and management, and trying to understand the mechanisms behind the changing cultural patterns (e.g. Lassila 1987, Brunila & Uusitalo 1989, Jyrämä 1999, Sorjonen 2004), were also novel approaches.

Several doctoral consumer dissertations in the beginning of the first decade of 2000 were already at least partly qualitatively oriented but still more or less based on traditional consumer information and decision theory and/or methods (Juntunen 2001, Öörni 2002, Ylikoski 2002, Koiso-Kanttila 2003, Lehtikoinen 2005, Huotilainen 2005, Hakala 2006, Niva 2008).

However, there were many who totally turned their back on previous methodology and promoted instead a constructionist approach (e.g. Moisander 2001). By the end of the first decade of this century, a big change has taken place in consumer research: It now predominantly concentrates on the cultural and symbolic aspects of consumption and applies research methods familiar from cultural research such as discourse analysis, ethnographic analysis, videography etc. The 'consumer culture' tradition in Finland includes, for example, the following doctoral dissertations: Valtonen (2004) on free time and symbolic goods, Lampinen (2005) on users of new technology, Joutsenvirta (2006) on conflicts between the forest industry and Greenpeace, Autio (2006) on youth consumption, Lammi (2006) on consumer enlightenment films, Ahola (2008) on consumer experience at trade fairs and art exhibitions, Leipämaa-Leskinen on consumers' mental relationship to food (2009), Lähteenmäki (2009) on consumer view on giving personal information to marketers in the internet, Rokka (2010) on new 'translocal' consumer communities in the internet, Jyrinki (2010) on consumer identities and pet consumption, and Mikkonen (2010) on consumer resistance against marketer-constructed consumer identities. Many more are under way.

In a small country, one approach and method can easily overshadow other alternative ways of doing research. A cultural approach can bring, and has brought, many new insights to understand consumers. Still, it is very difficult to see how well the knowledge base can be accumulated by using exclusively qualitative and interpretative methods. Moreover, not every doctoral student has a background in cultural theory and discourse analysis, which may encourage some degree of eclecticism.

No wonder that many departments and business schools in Nordic and other countries have more or less adhered to a more traditional and pragmatic line of consumer behavior research in addition to applying the new practices of cultural interpretative research. Basic experimental research and causal models have lately also been applied in quite new problem fields. One example is the rebirth of interest in consumer perceptual and cognitive processes in connection with the emerging paradigm 'neuroeconomics'. Based on experimental psychology and neuro-

sciences, the measuring of brain waves, facial or eye movements, or using other techniques especially applied to studying consumer perceptual and memory processes and emotional responses to visual communication, is one promising although still very narrow research line within Finnish consumer research. Special interest is paid to consumer reactions to stimuli in the Internet and other new virtual communication encounters. The field of neuroeconomics and consumer behavior is dominated by experimental psychologists (e.g., Ravaja et al. 2006, Simola et al. 2009) but also employs some marketing researchers (e.g. Kuisma et al. 2010).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Consumer research in Finland has very rapidly plugged in to the scientific trends and paradigm changes of different periods, although resources and numbers of researchers have always been rather limited, and only a few have been able to concentrate purely on consumer research. The interdisciplinary diversity of both theory and methodology means richness, but it also tends to prevent the construction of a universal research community with a distinct core and methodology. If there is a core, it should somehow be related to understanding consumer-citizen preferences and choice processes, and their individual and social backgrounds.

Interdisciplinary interaction in the form of seminars and common projects should be encouraged, and in this the Finnish Association of Consumer Research is helpful ([www.kulutustutkimus.net](http://www.kulutustutkimus.net)). However, under pressure of publishing in refereed journals, many researchers also seek their cooperators directly from universities abroad and in their own discipline.

In the 1970's, when consumer behavior research landed in Finland, one could be worried about the purely managerial and utilitarian approaches to consumer behavior research typical of that time (e.g. Uusitalo & Uusitalo 1981, 1985). The interest in brand choices put aside the study of more profound changes in consumption and their social and cultural backgrounds. Now, in contrast, we could ask whether consumer research is already to far too great an extent becoming an academic insider-activity with only few direct connections to real world problems including practical marketing and communication problems, social injustice, environmental problems, and problems of macro economy.

Economic choice and decision models give a good start to consumer studies, and consumer behavior teaching should, I feel, be concentrated in economic universities and departments. However, constant borrowing from and cooperation with other disciplines is also necessary in order to develop the theory further.

Disciplinary borders between economists, marketing researchers, sociologists and psychologists will most probably remain in place simply because the publication field is so strongly diversified along disciplinary lines. In the future, however, the academic backgrounds of research-

ers can become even more varied, and will include technology, art, social history, financial behavior etc. In this situation, problem-centeredness seems to be the only way to find cooperation between the various traditions. This requires that participants first possess a good knowledge of their own discipline.

Finnish consumer research has developed under pressure from both economic and social interests. It has experienced many paradigm shifts during the last century. It is still in a subordinate position in most university departments and business schools. However, in global business as well as in citizen-oriented government and municipal policy, it will be more and more important to understand consumers and citizens, and their cultural contexts. Private business firms and public decision makers alike need to improve their cultural competences in order to understand consumers, their ethical views and aesthetic preferences, and to be able to communicate with them efficiently. Consumer behavior research can have a promising future provided that it can find a satisfactory level of scientific quality and coherence. ■

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