

# Gender and green consumption: relational, practical, material

Rebecca Elliott<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology, London School of Economics and Political Science

## Abstract

Drawing on recent research on the topic, this essay synthesizes a sociological approach to understanding the intersection of gender and green consumption along interwoven *relational*, *practical*, and *material* dimensions. Each dimension foregrounds the ways in which many researchers have complicated presumptions about both 'gender' and 'consumption' as analytic categories. Taken together, such an approach offers a response to the predominance of individual-centred, preference- or identity-focused models of green consumption. Situating future studies along one or more of these dimensions provides an organizing vocabulary and a tradition of research to build knowledge systematically and dialogically.

Keywords: Gender; green consumption; relational; practical; material.

In April 2017, to coincide with Earth Day, *W Magazine* published a feature entitled '21 Chic, Sustainable Items to Shop This Earth Day,' showcasing 'eco-friendly' organic cotton sweaters, carbon-offsetting gold and diamond bracelets, swimwear made from recycled plastic bottles, and vegetable-tanned leather bags (Grosso, 2017). That a style magazine ran such a feature is by now not surprising. Green consumption—typically defined as the consumption of goods marketed as environmentally friendly or sustainable—is big business. That this feature did not appear in the magazine's Men's section and was comprised entirely of women's apparel and accessories is also not surprising. Women are more likely to embrace such 'eco-friendly' (as well as other ethically branded) products. Numerous studies, across countries, have confirmed this finding (Bellows, Alcaraz & Hallman, 2010; Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2003; Isenhour & Ardenfors, 2009; Luchs & Mooradian, 2012; Starr, 2009; Stolle and Micheletti, 2006; Roberts, 1996; Vitell, 2003; Zelezny, Chua & Aldrich, 2000).

Despite overwhelming convergence on this empirical observation, there is considerable divergence as to its social scientific, commercial, and political significance. Much of the research treats this as a puzzle of the 'gender effect,' where gender is a stable analytic category: a socio-demographic correlate that serves to describe a sovereign green consumer who can be identified, explained, and marketed to. Another strand of research has debated its implications: whether green consumption—or ethical/political consumerism more generally—is empowering or repressive for women. In this essay, I synthesize from the literature and my own research a sociological approach to understanding the intersection of gender and green consumption along *relational*, *practical*, and *material* dimensions. Here I address them separately as a way of organizing thinking on the topic, but these dimensions are of course interwoven in any given enactment of green consumption. Each dimension foregrounds the ways in which many researchers have complicated presumptions about both 'gender' and

‘consumption’ as analytic categories. In doing so, these researchers have exposed new valences to the relationship between the two. By formalizing the approach here, we can further explore avenues of empirical research beyond the (female) ‘identity’ of green consumers and their affinities for the kinds of conspicuously green products featured in glossy magazines, as well as leave aside unproductive binaries that require us to either celebrate or trivialize green consumption. Below, I address these relational, practical, and material dimensions in turn.

## The relational dimension

As an economic activity, green consumption involves relational work (Zelizer, 2012), meaning that it constitutes and differentiates social relations of various kinds—not only between people, but between people and objects, and between objects themselves. The very recognition, in our research and in the world, of something called ‘green consumption’ or of a ‘green consumer’ constructs a boundary between green and non-green products and between environmentally minded and environmentally apathetic or conventional consumers. The question then becomes: what role does gender play in constituting this boundary and in the social sorting that goes on along and around it? Fundamentally, examining the relational dimension of gender and green consumption begins from the premise that consumption is a social and socially structured act. It is not reducible to individuals, explained as a matter of idiosyncratic personal preferences that shape discrete choices of what to buy or use. Following from this, rather than fetishize a *real* ‘green consumer’, engaged in atomized self-directed projects of wants satisfaction and identity work, and who can be objectively specified as most commonly female, a relational perspective seeks to understand the ‘green consumer’ as a rhetorical construction (Cochoy, 2005; Trentman, 2006) who is gendered in particular ways (Cairns *et al.*, 2014). This shifts the analytical gaze from the empirical specification of consumers themselves to the examination of the political, commercial, and activist actors and institutions that work to fashion such a gendered rhetorical figure, shaping collective expectations that green consumers are or ought to be women, and particularly mothers (MacGregor, 2009).

Gender here then does not simply stand in for ‘women,’ nor is it a stable analytic category. Instead, gender is a process by which subjectivities are produced and shift over time and space, becoming salient through the work, discourse, and performance of green consumption undertaken by individuals *and* collective institutions (Butler, 1990; Nightingale, 2006). This raises questions about how and the extent to which green consumption becomes imbricated not only with femininity but also with masculinity (Brough *et al.*, 2016): why women, but also *why not* men? Conceptualizing gender more as a social process of ‘gendering’ also suggests that green consumption is not merely *symbolic* of gender (de Grazia, 1996). It can also constitute, trouble, or reconfigure gender subjectivities and norms related to care, parenting, and labour, both within the ‘private’ realm of the home and in ‘public’ spaces (Cairns, Johnston & MacKendrick, 2013).

The relational dimension to gender and green consumption also foregrounds the entanglement of gender with social class. As the opening anecdote suggests with its array of luxury goods, and as many studies have found, green consumption is a gendered form of class distinction (Cairns *et al.*, 2014; Elliott, 2013). Women are not a monolithic category any more than men are; the study of gender and green consumption should therefore treat this particular economic activity as one which socially sorts different ‘kinds of’ men and women from each other. Green products often carry higher prices, a kind of sustainability premium, and understanding the differences between products can require the willingness and ability to

spend time doing so, which is related (though not reducible) to social class (Schoolman, 2016). The expression of a taste for green products may also derive from the sub- or semi-conscious embodied cultivation and discernment provided by higher levels of education (Elliott, 2013). This combination of higher income and education yields the ability and preference of some women (and men) to engage in green consumption, reflecting and reproducing relations between gender and social class.

The relational dimension to gender and green consumption also scrutinizes the connection between people and products, and between the products themselves. The market for green products is itself socially structured, with goods classified in explicit or implicit rank-orderings relational to each other. For instance, the social connotations and symbolic meanings of electric cars, recycled paper towels, reusable water bottles, and organic soap will vary, in terms of both their relationship to social status and in their perceived masculinity or femininity. Those connotations and meanings become attached to products via the economic activities—which are at once and necessarily social activities—that constitute market transactions and that reshape categories of perception and appreciation, e.g. marketing (Bourdieu 2005). Put more simply, different green goods will mean different things to different people. In addition, the *same* green product may mean different things to different people. For instance, in Heffner, et al.'s (2007) study of hybrid cars, households ascribe different meanings to this product that shape whether they purchase them. It is through social processes in the market that male and female consumers are 'fit' or 'socially matched' to the products, green or not, that 'feel right' for them (Bourdieu 2005, 1984). As opposed to focusing on the consumer herself, the relational dimension urges greater attention to these social processes of fitting and matching in order to explain observations of the gendered character of green consumption.

## The practical dimension

The intersection of gender and green consumption can be further illuminated by following the practice turn taken in sociological scholarship on consumption more generally (Schatzki *et al.*, 2001). This relates directly to the relational dimension of consumption; attention to relational 'work' implies a focus on the *doing* of consumption. The idea of a sovereign 'green consumer' again gives way, in favour of an approach that understands consumption as a suite of (relational) practices (Warde, 2005). Rather than reflecting a stable identity, green consumption is instead the performance of such practices, which are, necessarily, also a performance of gender (de Grazia, 1996). This might lead us to ask, for instance, how green consumption figures into how men and women perform the tasks of daily life, e.g. bathing, doing laundry, shopping for food and preparing meals—many of which are habitual and routine, not implicated in the kind of self-conscious fashioning of identity or presentation of self that has long occupied the attention of many researchers (Warde, 2015). Examining the practical dimensions of green consumption elevates this mundane and ordinary character of so much of our daily consumption and expands the analysis to encompass not simply the selection of products but also their use (Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Barnett *et al.*, 2005). This directs attention to whether, or the ways in which, the *doing* of green consumption constitutes, sustains, or troubles the taken for granted status of various gender norms—particularly those related to gendered divisions of labour, care, and motherhood—and how practices of green consumption might vary according to gender (Cairns *et al.*, 2014; Cook, 2013).

Such an approach implies, also, ethnographic methods of study that can uncover gendered characteristics of green consumption that are inaccessible to the direct questioning of interviews or surveys (Hall, 2011). Men and women may not

be able to give an account of why they do or do not engage in green consumption, or their accounts may not match their actual behaviours (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). Ethnographic methods provide access to routines, to the flow and sequence of consumption, which can supplement data on decisions, attitudes, values, and deliberation, collected in interviews and surveys.

In tandem with the relational dimension, conceptualizing green consumption as a suite of practices questions theorizations of stable (gendered) identities related to green consumption. Instead, we can characterize, and assess the significance of, the multiple and various consumption practices that tend to ‘go together’ with the performance of masculinity or femininity. These practices can be diverse and contradictory, changing over time and from context to context, highlighting that green consumption is not one kind of thing any more than green consumers are (Barendregt & Jaffe, 2014). Such an orientation allows us to overcome the Manichean view that green consumption is either manipulative of or emancipatory for women: it can be both, even simultaneously (de Grazia, 1996; Cairns, Johnston & MacKendrick, 2013). The vast quantity and variety of consumption practices suggests that some might disrupt patriarchal political norms or amplify the power of women to shape political/environmental outcomes, while others might marginalize and trivialize the contributions of women. Some green consumption practices might ‘go together’ with more conventional forms of collective political action, such as voting, protesting, attending a political meeting, or contacting politicians (Baumann, Engman & Johnston, 2015; Micheletti, 2011; Willis & Schor, 2012). Other practices might privatize, individualize, and feminize responsibilities for environmental stewardship for instance by connecting ‘good’ mothering to conscientious food purchases, which not only leaves women feeling burdened (Cairns, Johnston & MacKendrick, 2013), but also privileges the household as a site of problematic consumption while leaving untroubled environmentally destructive political economies (Johnston, 2008; MacGregor, 2006; Sandilands, 1993; Schultz, 1993).

## The material dimension

Attention to the material dimension represents perhaps the most profound reframing of research on gender and green consumption. Consumption, whether marketed as green or not, is always an environmental act (Hawkins, 2012). What we consume, but even more significantly how *much* we consume, contributes to the ecological crises facing the planet, with the rich world consuming disproportionate amounts of resources and producing tremendous amounts of waste. Where the relationship between gender and green consumption has been concerned, much of the research has focused on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of conspicuously green products and practices. Yet the urgency of the crises we face suggests perhaps resituating green consumption as a broader project of linking gendered local and global political economies to the structuring of *all* consumption and its material environmental impacts. We might ask not only about the significance of gender in the proffering of the kinds of ‘eco-friendly’ consumer goods featured in *W Magazine*, but also its significance to the way societies consume energy and water and dispose of waste. It is, after all, these patterns of consumption that will fundamentally have to change (Shove & Spurling, 2013). Men and women are differentially made to feel responsible for, and do respond by, consuming resources less or differently (Tindall, Davies, & Mauboulès, 2003; Schultz, 1993).

An interest in the material dimension of consumption relates to the practical dimension outlined above, as it speaks also to the everyday and habitual, and to use rather than selection: how we heat and cool homes, how we wash our bodies and

clothes, how we stock our fridges and pantries and when we throw food away, and so forth (Shove, 2003; Shove, Walker & Brown, 2014; Evans, 2011; Warde, 2015). These kinds of consumption practices do not offer the same kinds of opportunities for gendered *displays*, but they are nevertheless gendered. Gender is a relation through which access to water, energy, and other resources is distributed in societies. Furthermore, gendered ruling institutions, like states, define our mundane practices and standards of consumption, related to both the habitual and the deliberative. They regulate utilities, govern credit and retailing practices, define appropriate standards of consumption with statistics and property laws, and provide the framework of private consumption through social spending on infrastructure, housing, health, and education (de Grazia, 1996: 9). Greater elucidation of consumption-production linkages can connect the intimate space of the home, and the gendered consumption practices that concern it, to the national and global arrangements that make it possible to consume in different ways across space and time, with profound material consequences.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have gleaned and synthesized the insights of many researchers to identify the relational, the practical, and the material as productive dimensions along which to analyse the intersections and interactions between gender and green consumption. Though I have analytically parsed these dimensions here, I have addressed the connections between them in order to underscore that they are empirically interrelated. What unites these dimensions into a sociological approach is that they offer a way to characterize a shared but as yet largely uncoordinated response to the predominance of individual-centred, preference- or identity-focused models of green consumption. Many scholars have critiqued such models, and the epistemological and methodological commitments of neoclassical or behavioural economics that typically underpin them, but the work of articulating coherent alternatives is ongoing. Part of the difficulty here is that a sociological approach complicates rather than simplifies, seeming to replace theoretical parsimony with a multiplicity of contributing actors and institutions, co-constituted objects of study, overlapping or contradictory processes, structural determinants, and ambivalent consequences. Yet, as the discussion of each dimension above shows, such complication is necessary in order to bring into view facets of gender and green consumption that are not reducible to individual choice or personal preference, and that cannot be uniformly encouraged or condemned. Situating future studies along one or more of these dimensions provides an organizing vocabulary and a tradition of research to build knowledge systematically and dialogically.

## References

- Adams, M. & Raisborough, J. (2010). Making a difference: ethical consumption and the everyday. *The British Journal of Sociology*. 61(2), pp. 256-274.
- Barendregt, B. & Jaffe, R. (eds.) (2014). *Green consumption: The global rise of eco-chic*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Barnett, C., Cloke, P., Clarke, N. & Malpass, A. (2005). Consuming ethics: Articulating the subjects and spaces of ethical consumption. *Antipode*. 37(1), pp. 23-45.

- Baumann, S., Engman, A. & Johnston, J. (2015). Political consumption, conventional politics, and high cultural capital. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. 39(5), pp. 413-421.
- Bellows, A.C., Alcaraz, G. & Hallman, W.K. (2010). Gender and food: A study of attitudes in the USA towards organic, local, U.S.-grown and GM-free foods. *Appetite*. 55(3), 540-550.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (2005). *The Social Structures of the Economy*. New York: Polity Press.
- Brough, A.R., Wilkie, J.E.B., Ma, J., Isaac, M.S. & Gal, D. (2016). Is eco-friendly unmanly? The green-feminine stereotype and its effect on sustainable consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*. 43, 567-582.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Play: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cairns, K., Johnston, J. & MacKendrick, N. (2013). Feeding the 'organic child': Mothering through ethical consumption. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. 13(2), 97-118.
- Cairns, K., de Laat, K., Johnston, J., Baumann, S. (2014). The caring, committed Eco-Mom: Consumption ideals and lived realities of Toronto mothers. In: Barendregt, B. & Jaffe, R. (eds.) *Green consumption: The global rise of eco-chic*. 100-114. London: Bloomsbury.
- Cochoy, F. (2005). A brief history of 'customers,' or the gradual standardization of markets and organizations. *Sociologie du Travail*. 47, E36-E56.
- Cook, D.T. (2013). Introduction: specifying mothers/motherhood. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. 13(2), 75-78.
- De Grazia, V. (ed.) (1996). *The sex of things: Gender and consumption in historical perspective*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Diamantopoulos, A., Schlegelmilch, B.B., Sinkovics, R.R. & Bohlen, G.M. (2003). Can socio-demographics still play a role in profiling green consumers? A review of the evidence and an empirical investigation. *Journal of Business Research*. 56(6), 465-480.
- Evans, D. (2011). Thrifty, green or frugal: reflections on sustainable consumption in a changing economic climate. *Geoforum*. 42, 550-57.
- Grosso, C. (2017). 21 Chic, Sustainable Items to Shop This Earth Day. *W Magazine*. Available from: <http://www.wmagazine.com/gallery/sustainable-shopping-earth-day/all>
- Hall, S.M. (2011). Exploring the 'ethical everyday': An ethnography of the ethics of family consumption. *Geoforum*. 42(6), 627-637.
- Hawkins, R. (2012). Shopping to save lives: Gender and environment theories meet ethical consumption. *Geoforum*. 43(4), 750-759.
- Isenhour, C., Ardenfors, M. (2009). Gender and sustainable consumption: policy implications. *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*. 4, 135-149.

- Jerolmack, C. & Khan, S. (2014) Talk is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy. *Sociological Methods & Research*. 43(2), 178-209.
- Johnston, J. (2008). The citizen-consumer hybrid: Ideological tensions and the case of Whole Foods Market. *Theory and Society*. 37, 229–270.
- Luchs, M. & Mooradian, T. (2012). Sex, personality, and sustainable consumer behavior: elucidating the gender effect. *Journal of Consumer Policy*. 35, 127–144.
- MacGregor, S. (2006). No sustainability without justice: a feminist critique of environmental citizenship. In: Dobson, A. & Bell, D. (eds.) *Environmental citizenship*, 101–126. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- MacGregor, S. (2009). A stranger silence still: the need for feminist social research on climate change. *The Sociological Review*. 57, 124–140.
- Micheletti, M. (2011). Why more women? Issues of gender and political consumerism. In: Micheletti, M., Follesdal, A. & Stolle, D. *Politics, products, and markets: Exploring political consumerism past and present*. 245-264. London: Transaction Publishers.
- Nightingale, A. (2006). The nature of gender: work, gender and the environment. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 24, 165-185.
- Roberts, J. A. (1996). Will the real socially responsible consumer please step forward? *Business Horizons*. 39, 79–83.
- Sandilands, C. (1993). On 'green consumerism': environmental privatization and 'family values'. *Canadian Women's Studies/ Les Cahiers de la Femme*. 13, 45–47.
- Schatzki, T., Knorr Cetina, K. & von Savigny, E. (eds.) (2001). *The practice turn in contemporary theory*. London: Routledge.
- Schoolman, E. (2016). Completing the circuit: Routine, reflection, and ethical consumption. *Sociological Forum*. 31(3), 619-641.
- Schultz, I. (1993). Women and waste. *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*. 4, 51–63.
- Shove, E. (2003). *Comfort, cleanliness and convenience: The social organization of normality*. Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Shove, E., Walker, G. & Brown, S. (2014). Material culture, room temperature and the social organization of thermal energy. *Journal of Material Culture*. 19(2), 113–24.
- Shove, E., Spurling, N. (eds.) (2013). *Sustainable practices: Social theory and climate change*. London: Routledge.
- Starr, M.A. (2009). The social economics of ethical consumption: Theoretical considerations and empirical evidence. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*. 38(6), 916-925.
- Stolle, D. & Micheletti, M. (2006). The gender-gap reversed: Political consumerism as a women-friendly form of political engagement. In: O'Neill, B. & Gidgengil, E. (eds.) *Gender and social capital*, 45-72. London: Routledge.

- Tindall, D.B., Davies, S., Maboulès, C. (2003). Activism and conservation behavior in an environmental movement: The contradictory effects of gender. *Society & Natural Resources*. 10, 909-932.
- Trentmann, F. (2006). The modern genealogy of the consumer: meanings, identities and political synapses. In: Brewer, J. & Trentmann, F. (eds.) *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*. 19–70. Oxford, UK: Berg.
- Vitell, S. J. (2003). Consumer ethics research: Review, synthesis and suggestions for the future. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 43, 33–47.
- Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*. 5(2), 131–53.
- Warde, A. (2015). The sociology of consumption: Its recent development. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 41, 117-134.
- Willis, M.M. & Schor, J. (2012). Does changing a light bulb lead to changing the world? Political action and the conscious consumer. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 644(1), 160-190.
- Zelezny, L., Chua, C. & Aldrich, C. (2000). Elaborating on gender differences in environmentalism. *Journal of Social Issues*. 56(3), 443-457.
- Zelizer, V. (2012). How I became a relational economic sociologist and what does that mean? *Politics & Society*. 40(2), 145-174.

## For Citation

Elliott, R. (2017). Gender and green consumption: relational, practical, material. *Journal of Consumer Ethics*. 1(2), 92-99.

## License Information

This is an Open Access article distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).