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Towards Multispecies Solidarity: Individual Stories of Learning to Consume Ethically

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Abstract

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Keywords: ethical consumption, multispecies solidarity, narrative enquiry

Introduction

In an era of mass consumption, concerns with the social, political and environmental costs of consumption have grown. These concerns are increasingly visible through the growing phenomenon of *ethical consumption*, wherein for many consumers, the economic act of consumption is linked to the acts of advocacy and protest. This results in a fusion of the economic value of purchasing with broader values such as animal and human rights. This growth of ethical consumption, also in terms of associated markets, is indisputable. Yet paradoxically, our understanding of what it means to be an ‘ethical consumer’, including the goals and potency of ethical consumption, remain contested. This has produced a rich and diverse scholarly interest, which in turn deconstructs ethical consumption in an effort to understand it. At times, this entails applying focus on specific strands of the phenomenon, such as the anti-consumerist movement or fair trade, helping us to track and evaluate ethical consumption at the level of differentiated applications. At the same time, it also signals the proliferation and applied contestation of what it means to be ethical and how individuals make ethical choices in the act of consumption. This is the entry point for this research, which serves as a foundational study for a broader phenomenological research project seeking to understand how ethical consumers self-identify and experience ethical consumption.

This paper outlines pilot research which aims to speak to the dilemma of what it means to be an ethical consumer when being ethical is, at a minimum, broad and complex in meaning and application, and at times contradictory and hopelessly confusing. It does so by unpacking three individual understandings of what it means to be(come) an ethical consumer, as well as the choices and challenges people face in their endeavours to consume ethically. It seeks to problematise whether the many faces of ethical consumption, from the fair-trade poster child to the phenomenon of ‘dumpster diving’ in the cover of darkness, can indeed be reconciled. Herein, a grounded approach to research is undertaken whereby the themes which emerge from participants themselves are prioritised in an effort to build a more robust and relevant research design for a larger future study.

The paper highlights a common thread in the three stories narrated: that of an emerging (albeit compromised) ‘multispecies solidarity’. This framing suggests that it may be possible to connect even diametrically opposed conceptions of ethical consumption, particularly where

ethical consumption is conceptualised as a ‘journey towards’ rather than an end-destination. A *process-oriented* conception of ethical consumption emphasises the role of relational empathy as a source of learning, but also tension, in endeavouring to consume ethically. Importantly, it also underpins a willingness to engage, even if the choices one faces and the capacity to act ethically remain imperfect, not least in the face of persisting structural barriers which inhibit the performance and impact of individual political agency through consumption. This in turn underscores the limitations of prevailing individualistic theoretical approaches to ethical behaviour, signalling the importance of undertaking further research that examines the relational basis of ethical decision-making. For this purpose, multispecies solidarity is proposed as a more robust framework for capturing the multiple relationships and values expressed within ethical consumption today.

Conceptualising ‘Ethical consumption’ and the ‘Ethical Consumer’ Within

A vast scholarship, from behavioural economics, sociology, political economy and beyond, has produced an interdisciplinary and pluralist development of the concept of ethical consumption. This discussion highlights twin and intersecting points of contestation relating to (a) the values underpinning the act of ethical consumption, including individual capacity to positively progress these values; and (b) the values embedded within ethical markets as fundamentally wedded to neoliberal markets and the associated limits on the effectiveness of ethical consumption which may result. This scholarship typically emphasises consumption as an individualised act and produces abstract principles endeavouring to explain ethical decision-making in this context.

In an era which Clive Hamilton describes as ‘the age of consumer capitalism’ (130), it is unsurprising that, as consumption increasingly pervades everyday life, individuals become increasingly introspective about not only the economic implications of their consumption, but the social, political and environmental import as well. The combination of a growing disposable income as countries develop, and growing cultural awareness, in part facilitated by affordable international travel, have connected individuals like never before and facilitated a growing consumer awareness (Clarke 8). Thus, scholarship has attempted to understand this recasting of the consumer, which according to rational choice theory contends that consumers simply seek to

maximise their ‘self-interest’ and the ‘utility’ (traditionally determined on price) of their purchases (Dickinson and Carsky 27). For example, Streek argues that a revision of the mode of utility maximisation has occurred in line with the shift from a ‘need-supplying’ to a ‘want-supplying’ economy (28). Drawing on Simmel’s concept of *Vergesellschaftung*, he refers to the phenomenon of ‘[S]ociation by consumption’, whereby consumers ‘conceive of an act of purchase... as an act of self-identification and self-presentation, one that sets the individual apart from some social groups while uniting him or her with others’ (Streek 35), leaving room for the individualised act of consumption to connect with broader collective interests.

For Harrison et al., a common concern ‘with the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world around them’ (2) unifies ethical consumers. This broadening of self-interest to an external or collective interest has been described by Dickinson and Carsky as ‘consumer citizenship’ (28), wherein ‘self-interest’ is broadened to ‘community interest’ (25-6). Herein, purchasing dollars are reconceived as ‘votes’ in tune with Frank A. Fetter’s early description of the ‘market’ as a ‘democracy’: ‘Every buyer... determines in some degree the direction of industry. The market is democracy where every penny gives the right to vote’ (1907n 394; cited in Dickinson and Carsky 25). This aligns with the Cooperative Bank’s definition of ethical consumption as ‘personal consumption where the choice of a product or service exists, which supports a particular ethical issue – be it human rights, the environment or animal welfare’ (cited in Low and Davenport 336). In the way that citizens in a democracy have a choice of political parties to vote for, so too do ‘citizen consumers’ make political choices through the consumables they buy, and the associated social/environmental and political footprint of those purchases. This has also been conceptualised in the literature as the enacting of ‘political responsibility’ or political ‘solidarity’ (Young 39-44). Yet this conception of ethical consumption obscures the complexity consumers confront in attempting to prioritise and understand the choices available to them.

Ethical consumers often focus on different ethical issues or contrasting combinations of ethical issues. This diversity, in what Low and Davenport call ‘ethical baselines’ (341) may in itself produce confusion, if not dilemmas for ethical consumers in how they define and experience ethical consumption. Indeed, as ethical consumer markets grow, so too do consumer guides and tools designed to assist consumers capacity to navigate them. For example, the ‘Shop

Ethical! Your Ethical Consumer Guide' website (Ethical Consumer Group) provides advice to consumers to support their capacity to make informed ethical decisions across four broad categories of products and services: 'people', 'planet' and 'animals' impacted by consumption, and 'companies' implicated in consumption. Twelve sub-issues are also identified. These may be complementary, but if we compare the goal of supporting marginalised producers in developing countries ('people') with our purchases, to the environmental ('planet') cost of importing goods from international markets, then the conflict between different ethical baselines becomes apparent, a type of occurrence which Clarke referred to as 'contradictions and trade-offs' (ix). Thus, the diversity of values, combined with confusion over available mechanisms for enacting ethical consumption, complicate the scope to clearly define what we mean by 'ethical consumption'.

This diversity in values also extends to diversity in associated practices, which in turn informs critique of the effectiveness of ethical consumption for driving meaningful change. Harrison et al. identify five key practices spanning the gamut of either 'product'- or 'company'-based ethical purchasing: boycotts, positive buying, fully screened, relationship purchasing and anti-consumerism or sustainable consumerism (3). Cowe and Williams note that the evidence shows higher participation in 'positive buying' by higher income groups, compared to the strategy of 'boycotting' (91). This underscores the exclusivity of some ethical consumption practices. There is also a broader philosophical concern for many consumers over the extent to which they should participate in consumption at all – a concern with the 'ethics of consumption' (Clive Barnett et al. 21) in regard to the waste attributed to consumption at large, 'ethical' or otherwise. This leads to a rejection of consumer consumption (for example, through food self-sufficiency). Indeed, some scholars now question the extent to which ethical consumption in all its guises delivers a substantive challenge to existing commercial practices and standards. Looking at 'fair trade', Jaffee raises the question of whether it is best described as a 'movement' or a 'market' (11-35). In a previous paper, I also question the 'market contesting', 'market harnessing' and 'market affirming' expressions of fair trade (Valiente-Riedl 159-85). Indeed, a concern with the legitimacy of capitalist markets hovers like a storm cloud over those who advocate for consumer-led social change.

Many question whether so-called ethical markets can address the deep-seated exploitation associated with a capitalist system of exchange. Within Critical Animal Studies (CAS), for example, the role of the capitalist system as a key systemic driver of animal exploitation serves as a central focus (Nibert xvii). Indeed, Sanbonmatsu defines capitalism as ‘the highest form of speciesism’ (30), which he in turn describes as ‘the system by which human beings dominate, exploit, and kill other conscious beings for their purposes’ (1). For Nibert, while markets under capitalism certainly deliver the freedom to ‘choose’, that choice is limited to ‘*commodities* that could be bought from capitalist enterprises’ (xv, my emphasis). This commodification effect quite literally produces what Sanbonmatsu aptly describes as the ‘thingification’ of non-human animals (17). So, while ethical consumers may have the choice to purchase more ethically produced commodities, they fail to impact the broader *commodification* effect of capitalism, which is understood to be the root cause of violence against animals. Arguably then, the potency of individual consumption behaviours needs to be measured against a broader context that demands not only individual action, but deeper epistemic and institutional changes (Wadiwel 30-2).

Methodology

In the context of this complexity, the undertaking of diverse empirical studies, which build and test our understanding of this phenomenon, remains critical. There are a limited number of studies on ethical consumption in Australia (for example, see Parker, Carey and Scrinis; Carey, Parker, Scrinis; Clarke; Gibson et al.; Lane et al.; Williams et al.,) and still fewer that offer qualitative analyses (for example, see Auger and Devinney; Humphery; and Cherrier). Papaoiknomou et al., in their study of ethical consumption in Spain, emphasise the importance of international case studies which help to build a global understanding of ethical consumption and any geographically contingent differences. They emphasise the need for deep qualitative research to help build definitions of ethical consumers ‘from the perspective of the actual consumer’ (224). Methodologically, this study contributes to the qualitative studies on ethical consumption in Australia and theoretically, it offers an opportunity to test and build the theories of ethical consumption discussed above, which benefit from further phenomenological exploration.

The fundamental question that guides this research is ‘how do individual consumers explain and experience their “ethical” consumption and what opportunities and obstacles do they face?’. The aim of this study is to explore the diversity and complexity of ethical consumption as perceived by ethical consumers themselves, which is understood to be accommodated by deep rather than broad enquiry. This is typical of qualitative research, which aims to provide a depth of understanding of phenomena, situations or issues, and for which attempts to quantify results are not made, ensuring that sampling is less relevant (Kumar 165). Accordingly, only a small sample size was targeted and ultimately, three participants were recruited (all referred to in this paper by participants self-selected pseudonyms). While this is a small sample size, with obvious consequences for the diversity of participants and the capacity to make representative claims, the small number of participants allowed for multiple interactions and deep engagement with individual stories, including in the presentation of results below. It also serves a critical role as phase 1 of a sequential mixed-method study (see Creswell 14), allowing key methods and concepts to be identified, tested and developed before expanding the participant base and methods in a future study. The present study thus serves the function of a springboard for ongoing research in this area.

The stories of the three participants were collected and are presented through narrative methodology. Narrative research seeks to provide a platform or ‘voice’ to research participants, perceived as stakeholders who have, according to Conelley and Clandinin ‘long been silenced in the research relationship’ (4). Humans are conceived as ‘storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives’; as such, it is the role of the narrative researcher to ‘describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them and write narratives of experience’ (2). Narrative research therefore begins by providing a platform for the research participant to tell their story, with encouragement (but not intervention) from the researcher (4). This research is understood as ‘a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and re-storying as the research proceeds’ (4). As such, it is also important to make the researcher (and possible biases) visible in research outputs. In this study, the narrative interview was also supplemented by participant observation in a shared shopping experience as well as a follow-up semi-structured interview. These methods were designed and sequenced carefully, to permit an engagement with participants over an extended period of time, to allow a triangulated discovery of their

experiences of ethical consumption and to create space for a collaborative analysis and crafting of their stories.

The stories of Fiorella, Louisa and Olivia were captured at a time when all three young women were studying at the University of Sydney. They all saw the flyer for this study at an on-campus food cooperative. When I first met them, we began with their uninterrupted narratives of how they became ethical consumers and what being an ethical consumer means to them. This was essential not only to learn about their experiences in ‘story’ form, but also helped to manage my biases as researcher, as I had to sit back and *listen* first. I then had opportunities to ask questions, including questions about key milestones in what was clearly ‘a journey towards ethical consumption’ for all. I later joined Fiorella and Olivia for a regular grocery shop. With Louisa, who by then was regularly ‘dumpster diving’ for her food needs, we rather met to discuss her experiences as this activity takes place covertly at night. Given that there was a distance of months between the telling of the first narrative and the final follow-up interview, I was able to observe developments in their experiences and self-identification as well as to dig into shared and contrasting experiences. I also found myself in a process of relational learning, akin to the experiences my participants had in their own consumer journey, where their consumer journey was very much influenced by others. I now turn to their experiences, which in line with narrative methodology are first shared in ‘narrative’ or ‘story’ form.

Participant Narratives: Stories of Learning to Consume Ethically

Narrative 1: Louisa’s Story

Louisa is a young University student who is committed to sustainability, minimising waste and not buying from big corporate businesses. Over time, the issue of animal cruelty has also become ‘a little bit larger’ for her. She practices ethical consumption by leading a vegetarian lifestyle, buying locally, volunteering and shopping at her local cooperative store and increasingly, through ‘dumpster diving’. She has been strongly influenced by people and places, which at different times have constrained or enabled her purchasing decisions. Moving away

from home created capacity for autonomous decision-making. Moving from a small town to the city gave her access to a more diverse marketplace including more ethical choices. Experiencing a different culture of food while travelling in Nepal demonstrated the possibility of a vegetarian lifestyle to her. In turn, travelling in Indonesia and encountering a stronger meat-based food culture led to feelings of discomfort about imposing her vegetarian lifestyle on others. Friends and partners have also shaped her emerging ethical views. Louisa reflects that her ethical consumption produces a ‘sea of contradictions’ at times. For example, while she believes there are ethical ways of producing/consuming meat, she is still vegetarian. Also, sometimes her desire for commercial ice-cream will trump her commitment to buying ethically.

Narrative 2: Olivia’s Story

Olivia is a young, highly educated woman who identifies with the ‘aim’ of consuming ethically. She is uncomfortable with the label of ‘ethical consumer’ as she conceives this pursuit as an imperfect ‘process’ riddled with imperfect information/knowledge, questionable motivations and impacts, competing values and regular occurrences of compromise. Her aspiration for ethical consumption is underpinned by a range of values including environmental protection, animal rights and economic rights. She works to realise these values through a range of approaches including a vegan lifestyle, consuming less, buying second-hand and buying from ethical businesses. Olivia encounters a range of barriers to ethical consumption. For example, she is currently living at home again with her parents and subject to their consumption values and choices, which include purchasing from ‘big business’ commercial retail outlets compared to her preference for cooperative outlets. Olivia is not always confident about her motivations, knowledge base and impact and can find the experience of (ethical) consumption challenging. This uncertainty has produced feelings of guilt about ethical compromises in the past, however, more recently she has found comfort by recognising that compared to others ‘she’s at least trying’.

Narrative 3: Fiorella's Story

Fiorella is a young mother studying to be a veterinarian at University. As an ethical consumer she values environmental sustainability, animal rights and human rights. Fiorella's journey to ethical consumption was heavily influenced by animals, people and places. Moving from Ecuador to the United States with her parents when she was 14 was 'a big change because my mind opened'. She was exposed to different systems of protection (minority rights, human rights, animal rights etc.) and she was also exposed to 'so many cultures'. Inside herself she always felt certain things she observed growing up 'weren't right' (such as her parent's reliance on a maid in the US), but increasingly she is able to verify these feelings as she learns more about global injustices and ethical choices. For Fiorella, the turning point was when the organisation 'Mercy for Animals' came into her college and paid people to watch videos of animal cruelty. She had eaten meat all her life thinking it was 'just meat'. From that point, she became exposed to animal and environmental protection causes and found 'the more I knew, the more conscious I was'. Today she is a vegetarian and committed to cutting out plastic in her consumption. Fiorella's ethical choices are often constrained by affordability.

Discussion

These three narratives underscore that ethical consumers are not born, but rather made and that this 'making' of ethical consumers emerges over time. Ethical consumption was by no means experienced as a resolved space within which Louisa, Fiorella or Olivia always knew 'what' is ethical or 'how' to consume ethically. They also encountered as many barriers as opportunities to consume ethically. Their stories suggest that ethical consumption is experienced as a dynamic and active learning process. This, as will be discussed below, points to relational influences that produce an emerging conscientisation of not only human-human relationships, but multi-species relationships and interdependencies.

Learning through spheres of relational influence

All participants saw ethical consumption as an aspirational goal and in some cases, were reluctant to call themselves ‘ethical consumers’. For example, Louisa acknowledged that ‘I have a lot of ideas and convictions but then I don’t follow them all through to the complete fruition of what I think they are’. For Olivia, ethical consumption is very much conceived as a goal: ‘I guess I would say that I’m kind of hesitant to straight away identify myself as an ethical consumer because I feel as though it’s always an aim, it’s a process’. She goes on to explain that she still feels she has a lot to learn:

I feel like I’m still uninformed about a lot of the economics and the sides of the company and the exploitations and that’s something I’m trying to find out more about. And as I become more informed, I think I would make that a higher priority.

Fiorella similarly acknowledges that ethical consumption is about ‘trying’ – ‘in every meal, I really want, when I go for groceries – I try to buy the healthiest’. She also values her capacity to embrace change: ‘I feel proud of where I come from, because many people don’t want to change... but I’ve seen change and I hope to change’. These experiences demonstrate the dynamism of ethical consumption, which is progressively learned relative to the influence of relationships and places over time.

Relationships with others, and also experiences of ‘place’ were central to the emergence (and in some cases contraction) of participants’ ethical identity and practices over time. This is consistent with Barnett et al.’s (31) claim that there are not only organisational elements to ethical consumption (for example, the curation of ethical offerings by advocacy organisations, policy-makers and business), but that there is an ‘inter-subjective dimension’ as well. Here they referred to a process of ‘moral selving’ which entails a ‘complex [of] self-other relations which can be involved in governing the consuming self’ (31). For example, all participants shared a key milestone whereby their independence as they transitioned from child in the home to adulthood in their own homes, permitted a process of learning about and engagement with ethical consumption, in line with new relationships or changing power dynamics and/or proximity within existing relationships. Louisa attributes her vegetarianism to moving away from her family environment and the ‘smallish town’ in which she grew up, as well as the influence of a

friend. Fiorella reflects on her home environment in Ecuador as lacking education on ethical values and choices and where she did have awareness of any injustices, lacking the ‘authority to say anything to my mum’. The importance of people and place is also underscored in Olivia’s example, where moving back home resulted in having to ‘backslide a little bit’ as she felt she had ‘less independence in making these decisions living with my parents’.

The importance of learning from others is not only contained to the graduation from childhood to adulthood but is an ongoing theme for all participants. For example, Louisa credits the influence of a close friend she travelled with for becoming vegetarian:

I probably have been a vegetarian because I’ve met some people who have given me good arguments about why to be a vegetarian... I have a good friend who I actually went to Nepal with... she... was a vegetarian before me... just spending time with her, I noticed a general hesitancy towards eating meat for probably a year before being like... oh, actually, no, I’m not going to eat that.

Similarly, Fiorella was strongly influenced by an uncle she visited as an adult, and by his practices on the sustainable organic farm, which he runs and lives from. For Olivia, ‘just talking to people and growing more aware, especially through university, is where I became, I guess, more politically motivated and thinking about these [ethical] decisions’. The influence of others was also not constrained to people. In Fiorella’s case, ‘witnessing’ the experience (or rather abuse) of animals was pivotal in her ethical consumption journey.

The influence of relationships and place was particularly pronounced in Fiorella’s migration journey from Ecuador to the US as a child; a move which also delivered contrasting and powerful experiences of solidarity with animals. Fiorella explains:

I left [Ecuador] wanting to be a veterinarian because of Ecuador. I saw so many dogs run over. That broke my heart so many times... So I went to the US and that [consumption awareness] completely changed, because I saw so many cultures. And so many diversities and many protections about the minority and human rights and Greenpeace. So, as I was exposed to that way.

This empathetic engagement with animals continued while she lived in the US. She reflected on the heavy waste of unsold meat from grocery stores in the US:

...how many animals just were killed, and raised, spent energy and time to be raised and killed for nothing – for just having plastic around it? Being through the industry, frozen, whatever. All the energy. It's just so sad to think about it. Because they were killed for nothing. They were mistreated for nothing. And they don't want to die. I mean, they're not... They're just trying to live. They're just trying to find their way. And when they feel mishandled and mistreated. They feel it.

What is interesting about Fiorella's story, and others, is the richer context in which this concern for the wellbeing of animals, as well as other humans and plant-life, emerges and is contested. This points to the need to consider the role and dynamism of empathy and connected to this, to consider the possibility of an emerging multispecies solidarity in further unpacking the phenomenon of ethical consumption.

Emerging yet constrained multispecies solidarity

For each participant, ethical consumption was navigated in a relational context pointing to the importance of empathy in building, negotiating and prioritising ethical values in their consumption practices. Gruen, in her work on 'entangled empathy' sees this as a key omission of traditional ethical theories, which 'tend to ignore these centrally important relations'. Thus, 'entangled empathy' is put forward as an alternative ethical proposition, defined as:

...a type of caring focused on attending to another's experience of wellbeing. An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognise we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities. (Gruen 3)

The concept of empathy helps to explain that as citizens and as consumers, values are learned and adapted in relational contexts, as we saw reflected in the temporal and still imperfect negotiation of ethical consumption by the participants in this study. It also points to the potential

relevance of ‘multispecies’ solidarity, over traditional political solidarity, as a framework that helps to emphasise the multiple relationships navigated in the pursuit of ethical consumption.

The concept of ‘solidarity’, and related to this, spheres of connectivity in and beyond human-human relationships, is contested in the literature. This is crucial to consider, as it helps to frame understanding of the evolving ethical consumption values, which Louisa, Fiorella and Olivia self-identify with. It also entails considering theories of ethical consumption in light of an emerging literature on multispecies solidarity. Political solidarity – specifically referring to human-to-human solidarity – is a key concept within scholarship that examines ethical consumption (see Young 39-44 and Renard 89). Kendra Coulter provides an expanded conception of solidarity through the notion of ‘interspecies solidarity’, which she defines as: ‘an idea, a goal, a process, an ethical commitment, and a political project that can help foster better conditions for animals, improve people’s work lives, and interweave human and animal well-being’ (3). Indeed, a broader and still emerging literature on ‘multispecies ethnography’ challenges the tunnel vision of human-to-human relationships. It also challenges the human-and-animal centric lens, which has dominated the study of human-animal relationships and continues to exclude ‘micro-organisms and plants’ (Smart 3-4). A broader concern with ‘multispecies’ solidarity, comprising humans, animals and plant-life, while not fully realised, was certainly apparent in the stories of participants considered in this study.

All participants had a strong and consistent concern with the issue of environmental sustainability, though the range of issues they were concerned with and their relative prioritisation of these evolved over time. In Louisa’s initial narrative interview, she explained:

...the environmental side of things has almost been more of interest to me than the inhumane aspects of animal killing. Although that does concern me, it was never quite enough to make me be a vegetarian.

However, several months later she observed that over time the issue of animal cruelty has become ‘a little bit larger for me’. In contrast, Olivia was heavily motivated to become a vegetarian by environmental issues, as well as the issue of animal cruelty: ‘I was always a big animal lover... [S]o I think that was something for me from an early age’. Finally, for Fiorella, sustainability, animal rights and the health of her family all factor highly as values that drive her

consumption. But these values have been progressively attained through different experiences and exposure. For example, her passionate concern with animal rights emerged through exposure to animal cruelty in food-production at a University video viewing:

...then I knew how it was made and that to me, that was just – that’s just disgusting! How that can be consumed? Like, no. And I just learned how the animals were killed and I said – no, I don't want to support that.

This passion for animal rights is complemented – or sometimes compromised – by her passion for sustainability and the wellbeing of her family more broadly. For example, she contends with duelling conceptions of ‘waste’. While she is concerned with minimising waste and the negative impact of plastic on the environment, she also strongly defends the importance of ‘not wasting money’ for her own wellbeing and that of her family:

Because I really try... For me, it’s mentally. Because my [expenses] in Australia is really high, so I really try to not waste. Because to me, it’s wasting money.

Herein, sustainability imperatives are disciplined by concerns for the negative impact that financial stress would have on her ability to look after her daughter in particular. So, when Fiorella purchases heavily plastic wrapped foods because they are more affordable, she works to ‘repurpose’ that plastic at home and in her garden as a compromise.

In all three cases, the interaction of participants with other humans, with other species and with themselves – either critically or empathetically – was at play and shaped the emergence and navigation of their ethical values and practices. For example, despite their strong commitment to vegetarian diets, both Louisa and Fiorella were understanding of their partners who both continue to eat meat. Indeed, all participants were understanding of the different values their family members subscribed to, and respectful of other people’s choices. This sometimes entailed observations that they had positively influenced change in others (for example, Olivia observed that her parents quite regularly ate vegan meals now). In these ways, their own principles were articulated and navigated in a broader relational context. The importance of familial relationships in negotiating vegan diets has been recognised in the literature (see Twine). Importantly, this web of inter-relationships suggests that there is great value in applying a broader conceptual and methodological lens to the study of ethical

consumption, such as that permitted by ‘multispecies’ interactions. This is not to say, however, that the ways in which ‘rights’ are conceived within this ‘multispecies’ framework are necessarily aligned, or that the modality of *individualised consumption* provides an optimal means to express solidarity.

Clear constraints to an emerging multispecies solidarity were also apparent across these stories of ethical consumption. For example, it was obvious that there were very different conceptions of ‘animal rights’ at play across these case studies, indicative of an ongoing contestation of how solidarity with animals might be enacted through consumption. While Louisa saw scope for the ethical consumption of meat and continued to eat animal products on occasion, Fiorella is strictly vegan on the basis of animal rights. Herein these participants demonstrate the polarity of a ‘welfarist’ and ‘abolitionist’ approach to animal rights (see Coulter 105). Moreover, the cases of Louisa and Olivia in particular, demonstrate the ongoing information deficit produced within the market system. Indeed, one could argue that the experience of evolving values and ongoing learning is consistent with the difficulty if not impossibility in unravelling the ‘thingification’ effect that commodification under a market system produces (see Sanbonmatsu 17). This reinforces Wadiwel’s critique of the potency of individual consumer agency in a context where broader systemic and epistemic change are needed (32). Again, pointing to the limitations of individualistic approaches to ethical behaviour given the broader institutional and systemic contexts that individuals must navigate.

Conclusion

Ethical consumption has moved from the fringes of modern-day vernacular to become common terminology for many consumers. It exists in a myriad of forms including supermarket offerings such as ‘fair trade’ and ‘organics’, homegrown gardens and community gardens, as well as the boycotting of companies and products. It is advanced on the basis of numerous values including human rights, animal rights, environmental sustainability and health. While this growth and expansion of ethical consumption has been significant, the literature on this phenomenon also shows that it simultaneously presents a somewhat confusing mixing pot of values and practices and these are not always aligned. This complexity points to the value of lifting individual

perspectives and experiences of ethical consumption to the foreground, so we can deepen and expand our understanding of how consumers themselves understand and value ethical consumption.

For the individual stories evaluated and presented in this study, ethical consumption emerges as a dynamic process navigated in a rich and diverse relational context. This challenges the emphasis on individualised values and decision making, which is often made in the literature on ethical consumption. In Fiorella, Louisa and Olivia's ongoing journeys toward ethical consumption, a fledgling multispecies solidarity emerges. This entails ongoing negotiation with, and consideration of loved ones in their lives, as well as their empathetic engagement with ecological environments and animals. Herein, a multispecies frame helps to capture the complexities of values and relationships which ethical consumers navigate. It allows the human-centric concerns that compromise ethical consumption to be captured and to be understood in dynamic connection with the non-human solidarity which participants also sought to enact. These three examples suggest that rather than a fraught and competing landscape, there is scope to see the intersection of values and experiences within ethical consumption re-articulated as a process seeking multispecies solidarity. Whether the market modality – ethical or otherwise – can support these endeavours, is another question.

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