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ARTICLE

Making a Habit of It

Positional Consumption, Conventional Action and the Standard of Living

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Abstract.

Rising inequalities and high levels of consumption in many capitalist economies make understanding the relationship between stratification and consumption especially important at the turn of the 21st century. I propose that one way to advance this research is to build on work in the tradition of Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption. This scholarship is often disparaged as positing an overly rational and manipulative consumer actor. I argue instead that the positional consumption literature in the Veblenian tradition offers a more complex view of the consumer actor than typically recognized and in particular allows an important role for habit, routine, and convention in consumer behavior. I identify three major arguments about the influence of habit on positional consumption from work in the Veblenian lineage. I conclude that incorporating this more complex view of emulative consumption produces more satisfying theoretical propositions about the dynamic relationship between consumption levels, the standard of living, and structures of inequality than typically addressed in research on stratification and consumption.

Key words

habit • inequality • positional consumption • standard of living

THE MOST IMPORTANT traditions of scholarship on consumption consider stratification processes to be central to understanding the use, distribution and meanings of goods in modern social life. Class and status inequalities

have been especially central in Thorstein Veblen's (1994[1899]) theory of conspicuous consumption and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction as well as the work that builds on these traditions (e.g. Holt, 1997; Schor, 1998; Wright, 2005). Scholars of consumer culture and even post-modern approaches also interpret stratification structures to be key factors in shaping identity and the symbolic cosmology of consumption (Baudrillard, 1998; Lamont and Molnar, 2001; McCracken, 1988; Zelizer, 2005; Zukin, 2004). Recent shifts in stratification in modern societies continue to raise important questions about the relationship between consumption and stratification. The striking rise of income inequality in the US and many other countries in the last decades of the 20th century has important consequences for consumption patterns and the standard of living. High levels of consumption, an apparent boom in luxury spending, and rising indebtedness have accompanied rising disparities, raising further questions about the relationship between trends in income and spending (Frank, 1999; Leicht and Fitzgerald, 2006; Slesnick, 2001). Advancing knowledge of consumption and stratification thus appears crucial for understanding modern capitalist societies.

In this article, I argue that one way to pursue this goal is to rehabilitate and extend work in the tradition of Thorstein Veblen. The Veblenian tradition has received much less attention than Bourdieu's theory of distinction in the work on consumption and stratification that has been done in recent years. Much of the most prominent work in the area has, for example, focused on evaluating the extent of class distinction in modern consumption and the role of distinction in class reproduction (Holt, 1997; Katz-Gerro, 2002; Lamont, 1992). Veblen's perspective, in contrast, is often portrayed as flawed and outdated. One major complaint about Veblen's theory is that it invokes an impoverished explanation of consumer motivation by positing a kind of crass competitiveness and single-minded focus on achieving higher status among modern consumers (e.g. Campbell, 1995; Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; Sullivan and Gershuny, 2004). Critics note that consumer behavior often does not evidence this degree of instrumental rationality, and in fact consumer action often seems oriented to different ends than maximizing status, including especially identity formation (Campbell, 1987). Perhaps because of this, economists have drawn more on Veblen in recent years than have sociologists and cultural scholars (Heffetz and Frank, forthcoming; Mason, 1998). However, this critique is based on too thin a reading of theories of positional consumption in Veblen's lineage.

I propose that Veblenian positional consumption theories advance a more complex theory of the mechanisms that link consumer practices to

stratification – and in particular have a more nuanced reading of the consumer actor – than is typically acknowledged. In fact, economists working in this tradition have explicitly developed these more complex features of his argument (Frank, 1999; Schor, 1998). While instrumental action certainly is significant in theories of positional consuming, there is also recognition of the importance of *conventional* action, organized by habit, tradition and routine, processes that are increasingly viewed as important in many social contexts (Biggart and Beamish, 2003; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). This view highlights the multiple processes through which consumer practices are structured by stratification – not only instrumental status competition – and this produces clearer and more diverse propositions about the relationship between inequality and consumption in modern capitalist societies than typically engaged in the literature.

Most importantly, I argue that recognizing the role of habit in the kind of positional consumption Veblen discusses provides mechanisms that relate stratification structures to the overall level of consumption, the constitution of the ‘standard of living,’ and the tendency of both to expand over time in affluent countries such as the USA. These are all key to understanding the nature of modern consumer culture. Indeed, the few scholars who have given the most serious attention to the relationship between rising income inequality and consumption work more or less within Veblen’s legacy (Frank, 1999; Schor, 1998).

In the core of the article, I excavate the thread of habit in theories of positional consumption. I find three major forms of habit in these discussions and focus in each case on how attention to the role of habit in positional consumption prompts questions about the relationship between stratification and the standard of living. I end each discussion by highlighting the implications of this view for change and novelty, arguing that habitual action is entirely compatible with the apparent flux of modern consumption. I close by proposing a research agenda that arises out of this theoretical synthesis, focusing on the dynamics of mass consumption during a period of increasing income inequality. First, however, I present some background on the conceptualization of habit in social theory and studies of consumption.

HABIT IN SOCIAL LIFE AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Habit was an important concept in classical social science and it has become even more central to contemporary theories of action and the new economic sociology (Beckert, 1996; Biggart and Beamish, 2003; Camic, 1986; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hodgson, 1998; Waller, 1988). It shows

up, for example, in the socioeconomic analysis of routines, conventions, taken-for-granted expectations, path dependency, hysteresis, and practices. All of these approaches share a basic understanding that *habit is the propensity of people to continue to do what they have done in the past without much conscious deliberation*. While habit represents a source of traditionalism and inertia in social life, most contemporary perspectives on the role of habit in the economy also emphasize its importance in the achievement of social order and coordination, and as a tool to manage uncertainty. In the Carnegie school of economics and the new institutionalism in economic sociology, habits are a kind of repository for past knowledge and experience, operating like shorthand in social life that provides decision rules for acting even in very uncertain and complex situations (Biggart and Beamish, 2003; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Simon, 1945). This means that following habit can be rational, at times more rational than deliberate calculation (van den Berg, 1998). Habit is therefore an often effective response to human cognitive limitations and to the complexity of the social context that must be navigated by human actors (Beckert, 1996; van den Berg, 1998).

There is also agreement that habitual behavior occurs on a continuum – from the most automatic action to a complex orientation to a particular behavior that is closer to conscious decision making (Biggart and Beamish, 2003; Camic, 1986). In this article I focus on *three major forms* of habit along that continuum that I will argue are particularly important in consumption behavior. At the most basic level, there is the straightforward operation of routine and tradition, where action taken for whatever reason in the past continues to be taken over time as a matter of habit. The original ‘purpose’ of the action may persist, but it continues as a matter of course rather than strategy. Second, habit appears as convention, through mimetic processes influenced by social context where action is driven by taken-for-granted social comparison and is not subjected to a particularly conscious deliberative process. Finally, there is a perspective on habit that has a particularly wide scope in the conception of *habitus* used by classical theorists (Camic, 1986) and in contemporary literature, including of course Bourdieu (1984). A *habitus* is different from other habits because it provides a strategy of action that applies across disparate circumstances. As Camic describes it, ‘the point of using habit in its broadest sense is to denote not a sum of parts but a more nearly *all-encompassing modality of action*’ (Camic, 1986: 1046, emphasis added). This notion of a *modality of action* is particularly important for considering how habit manifests in complex modern societies, where a specific habitual response may be less useful than a disposition towards action that is responsive to context. This form of habit is often integrated

with and implicated in dynamic processes as well, crucial in complex societies undergoing rapid change (Sabel, 1994).

Like other economic arenas, consumption proves fertile ground for the operation of habit, convention and routine, especially in relation to stratification. Habit is of course significant in the dominant perspective on stratification and consumption, Bourdieu's theory of distinction. Bourdieu's conception of the *habitus* involves taken-for-granted expectations about the proper way of consuming and living that are followed as a matter of course rather than deliberate calculation.¹ Indeed, it is precisely because many distinctive consumption practices are taken for granted that they are so effective in perpetuating class and status reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984). Emulation of higher class consumption as a deliberately calculating effort to impress is likely to fail because it is insufficiently 'embodied' (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1997). As Bourdieu vividly explains: 'the consumption of 'imitations' is a kind of unconscious bluff which chiefly deceives the bluffer' (1984: 323). Distinctive habits make emulation less effective in signaling status.

Yet the centrality of distinction in Bourdieu's theory limits interest in shared consumption behavior, especially in comparison to the Veblenian tradition. Bourdieuan approaches concentrate on differences in consumption *between* classes, directing attention to the role of consumption in class and status reproduction. The greater focus on emulative consumption that transfers *across* classes in the Veblenian tradition draws attention instead to the role of stratification structures in general consumption practices and levels.² Thus for the most part, mass consumption and its homogenizing pressures on standards of living are not accommodated well within Bourdieu's theory, and this has been one of the key sources for critique of his work. As many critics have noted, there is quite a bit of similarity in consumption patterns across classes in developed industrial societies, often seeming to swamp the distinctive patterns that remain (DiMaggio, 1978; Erikson, 1996; Halle, 1993; Katz-Gerro, 2002; Lamont, 1992; Turner and Edmunds, 2002). The apparent contradiction between class distinction and a mass standard of living in the Bourdieuan tradition has led many to conclude that stratification may have become less important in structuring consumption over time.

The tension between understanding class distinction and mass consumption is in fact longstanding in the analysis of the relationship between stratification and consumption. One of the most striking examples of this is in the evolution of the ideas of Maurice Halbwachs, another French sociologist whose lesser-known work focused on the 'living levels'

of the European working class. His early work presaged Bourdieu's theory of distinction by arguing that different classes had entirely different consumption patterns (Coffin, 1999; Halbwachs, 1913). The 1920s expansion of mass consumption and the rise in the living levels of the working class in the USA challenged Halbwachs's view. He concluded that the working class was not bound by traditional habits of consumption or fundamentally different from other classes in its consuming patterns, but rather would adopt middle-class standards so long as not overly constrained in resources. He revised his theory so that consumption might expand within all classes, and classes may become more similar in some areas – though he did not attempt to identify a mechanism for that process (Halbwachs, 1933).³ Like Bourdieu's critics, Halbwachs interpreted mass consumption to reduce the association between class and consumption.

The work in the Veblenian tradition suggests, however, that emulative processes linked to stratification structures shape consumption that is similar across classes. I argue that this feature of Veblenian positional consumption is a result of the role of habit as a mechanism for consumer emulation.

POSITIONAL CONSUMPTION AS HABITUAL ACTION

Next I excavate the thread of habit in Veblen's original theory and later extensions that focus on the relationship between stratification structures and consumption. The core of this theoretical tradition is the observation that consumption is the key medium for the representation of wealth and social status in modern capitalist societies. Consumption is *visible* evidence of what Veblen calls 'pecuniary strength' and thus it becomes an important symbolic realm for status maintenance and class competition. Higher status groups display their superiority through conspicuous consumption and lower classes try to keep up by emulating the consumption of those ahead of them. While emulation is often interpreted to be a crude form of class competition, I will argue next that recognizing the role of habit in this theoretical tradition produces a more complex view of emulative consumption. I systematize these theoretical developments into three arguments about the role of habit in the mechanism of emulation in Veblenian theories of positional consumption. Each addresses a somewhat different form of habitual action, but in each case the symbolic language of consumption becomes taken-for-granted and adopted through relatively unreflective action. I argue that this work contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of the standard of living and the continual rise in levels of consumption, in part by proposing how habitual action intersects with change and novelty.

Note that my argument is not that habit is the only or even the major influence on status consumption – there are surely times when habitual consumption is disadvantageous and deliberate emulation clearly plays an important role. But claims about the mechanism of habit are typically presented right along with ideas about the influence of deliberate calculating action in the Veblenian tradition, and thus the role of habit is often overlooked.

Positional consumption becomes habitual

First, perhaps the most prominent form of habit in theories of Veblenian positional consumption is that consumption that begins as deliberately emulative is often eventually adopted and maintained primarily as a matter of habit. Veblen emphasizes this repeatedly. For example, he notes that the reliance on evidence of pecuniary strength through consuming as a ‘means of repute’ very quickly leads to an ‘insistence on it as an element of decency’. Many other scholars have similarly noted the tendency of many goods to start as luxuries and then diffuse to the rest of the population (for example, television, automobiles, and so on), eventually becoming decencies or even necessities and incorporated into the habitually maintained standard of living (Fischer and Hout, 2004; Schor, 1998).

As goods become incorporated into the standard of living, they may no longer operate as distinctions for higher compared to lower classes, but they still retain a *positional* character. The fact that many previously distinctive goods do not get dropped but instead transition from luxuries to decencies or necessities demonstrates that *the standard of living itself* contains important information about social standing. Evidence of the proper habits of living is crucial for being considered a part of ‘decent’ society. Goods that become a part of the habitually maintained standard of living thus in a sense have a distinguishing function – in separating the majority who are ‘middle class’ or ‘ordinary Americans’ from the minority of the poor or outcast – whereas luxury distinction goods separate the minority who are wealthy from the majority of ‘ordinary Americans’.

Viewed in this light, the high levels of consumption in modern societies may be maintained mainly by the force of habit. The key is that once a distinctive good eventually saturates the population through emulative processes, it is not abandoned but rather becomes redefined as part of the standard, while new goods become elite markers.⁴ In other words, consumers tend not to stop consuming a good adopted through emulation even if it no longer is a marker of distinction. As Veblen reasons, ‘the control exerted by the accepted standard of living is chiefly of a negative character;

it acts almost solely to prevent recession from a scale of conspicuous expenditure that has once become habitual' (Veblen, 1994[1899]: 106). Juliet Schor (1998) identifies a similar mechanism, which she calls 'the ratchet effect', explaining that consumers tend not to easily abandon goods or a level of spending once adopted. Indeed, Schor (1992) argues that the ratchet effect is part of what maintains the intensive work schedules of Americans, who must work and take the returns of their productivity in the form of higher pay rather than leisure in order to sustain consumption patterns that have become habitual.⁵ Therefore, even though deliberately emulative processes are not continuously activated in all consuming actions, their effect is felt through their legacy for consumer habits.

The process of distinctive goods becoming incorporated into the standard of living thus provides one explanation for why the standard continues to move upward and new products continue to be incorporated into it. As one good loses its distinction and is incorporated into the standard, another replaces it and the cycle starts again. McCracken (1988) calls this process 'chase and flight', and it highlights one dynamic result of the relationship between consumption and inequality.

Positional consumption as a social habit

The second form of habit in studies of positional consumption posits a broader form of conventional action in structuring the relationship between stratification and consumption behavior. Here, purposeful 'competitive consumption' (Schor, 1998) is supplemented with what we might call 'comparative consumption', which occurs without a deliberate attempt to impress but rather as a consequence of an actor's immersion in a particular social context, and is structured by taken-for-granted practices that help manage uncertainty.

The key to comparative consumption is that exposure to other people's consuming patterns and the marketplace of goods can shape consumption decisions relatively unreflectively. To the extent that the market and the distribution of goods among observed consumers are stratified, the impact of that exposure will carry the influence of stratification. For example, James Duesenberry's (1949) theory of demonstration effects posits that individuals will tend to adopt the consuming behavior of social contacts, but argues that 'demonstration effects need not depend at all on considerations of emulation or "conspicuous consumption"' (1949: 27–8), but rather that comparisons are taken-for-granted and made as a matter of course. Georg Simmel's (1957) related treatment of the 'trickle-down effect' in fashion similarly makes room for both deliberate and conventional consumption,

emphasizing that while high-status fashion claims to be entirely new and *au courant*, the emulative processes that lead fashions to trickle down from the top to lower levels of the stratification structure are often driven by conformist habits.

Robert Frank (1999) similarly argues that preferences may diffuse through mimetic processes that occur without intentional emulation. In his view, human cognition is structured around comparisons and we cannot help but be influenced by others' behavior.⁶ One example of how this occurs is in the typical response to pricing systems. Frank argues that when not guided by a clear preference and when not overly constrained by resources, many consumers tend to choose prices in the middle of the range. Duesenberry's demonstration effects and Frank's mimetic processes are similar to some of the ideas in the new institutionalism in economic sociology that suggest that actors follow practices because of their taken-for-granted appropriateness, and in order to meet expectations about the proper – the *standard* – way to go about things (Biggart and Beamish, 2003; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). This may be particularly important in managing the complexity and uncertainty of modern class systems. In Frank's description, choosing the middle price is a classic taken-for-granted 'rule of thumb' that helps to manage uncertainty. It is positional in the sense that the middle price is assumed to have sufficient quality and status to suit many middle-class buyers, but it is not necessarily oriented towards strategically seeking higher class status.⁷

This discussion suggests that some forms of positional consumption are more directed toward meeting the standard than attempting to best the competition. The goal is, in other words, achieving Veblen's 'conventional standard of decency'. This is related to the first form of habit discussed above, but the difference here is that positional consumption may manifest as conventional action even without an initially deliberate emulative move.

The notion of 'decency' in the standard of living points up a normative element in positional consumption, and suggests that the standard offers a model of the right way to live that relates to status in the sense that it provides individuals with an assurance of their social standing, but is not necessarily the pitched battle for social position usually associated with status consumption. Elizabeth Shove's (2003) work on heating systems and the development of norms about comfortable indoor temperatures demonstrates the intersection of the conventional with social status and 'normality'. Social historians who have studied the standard of living similarly emphasize that it is simultaneously conventional and aspirational (Coffin, 1999; Moskowitz, 2004; Martin, 1999: 431 makes a similar point).⁸ In a

complex unequal society, maintaining a standard is one way to ensure that one's family is not falling below a socially defined minimum even if also not reaching a higher level.

A key feature of these conceptions of comparative consumption is that they provide another explanation for changes in the standard of living. Shifts in the social context and level of inequality will result in changes in consumer behavior because of the positional nature of the standard of living even without intentional emulation (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996; Mason, 1998; Schor, 1998; Holt, 2005). For example, cultural changes such as the extension of new media and changes in the structure of inequality can affect the way that individuals make consumer comparisons. Schor (1998) argues that reference groups moved up the income scale at the end of the 20th century, increasingly including celebrities and co-workers instead of neighbors, and resulting in greater emulation of luxury items and 'upscaling' in consumption. Frank posits that increasing inequality at the end of the 20th century changed the impact of upper-class consumption on the market for consumer goods in ways that affected the taken-for-granted practices described above, including the reliance on price as a signal. As those in the top 20 per cent of household income pulled away from the rest, business shifted to produce more luxuries at the top of the scale for them. This change in the market changed the conditions of choice for the rest of consumers: because of the tendency of average consumers to make a selection somewhere in the middle of available choices, an increase in the ceiling of the options results in all consumers tending to migrate upscale in their consumption even if not deliberately emulating higher classes. This interpretation demonstrates the dynamic relationship between stratification structures and consumption, and shows how habitual action not only maintains existing patterns, but also shapes how new patterns are created.

Positional consumption as *habitus*

Finally, it is also possible to find intimations of an even broader conception of habit as *habitus* in Veblenian theories of positional consumption – an orientation that shapes consumer action in general. Schor (1998), for example, describes the 'Diderot effect', where acquiring one positional good leads almost automatically to more purchases (named for the philosopher Denis Diderot's rueful account of being compelled to remodel his entire study after receiving a new robe in *Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown*). This suggests that modern consumers are affected by the relative status of goods to each other that affects the orientation to consume, leading to consuming more than seemingly intended.

Even more, the preceding discussions of the standard of living as a conventional set of expectations can be extended to be interpreted as a *habitus* that is a disposition towards a certain consumption requirement that is socially defined. As Veblen observes:

For the great body of the people in any modern community, the proximate ground of expenditure in excess of what is required for physical comfort is not a conscious effort to excel in the expensiveness of their visible consumption, so much as it is a desire to live up to the conventional standard of decency in the amount and grade of goods consumed. (Veblen, 1994[1899]:102).

This 'conventional standard of decency' is structured by stratification and the struggle to maintain position, but the action underlying it is habitual in the sense that it is relatively unreflective and followed as a matter of course rather than deliberate strategy.⁹ Thus, he concludes: 'A standard of living is of the nature of habit' (Veblen, 1994[1899]: 106). Amartya Sen invokes a related idea when he argues that the standard of living should be defined relatively because of the different consumption demands of different forms of social organization: 'To lead a life without shame, to be able to visit and entertain one's friends, to keep track of what is going on and what others are talking about and so on, requires a more expensive bundle of goods and services in a society that is generally richer' (Sen, 1987: 18). This then is part of the source of the taken-for-granted expectations about what and how to consume discussed above. Emulative consumption is a piece of social participation that is part of a modern way of life.

The modern consumer *habitus* is not only emulative but seems to be oriented towards the adoption of *new* goods. A diverse set of work – including outside of the Veblenian tradition – argues that the modern propensity to consume ever more and newer goods is a process with important social content. While some treat this tendency as a relatively unproblematic result of growing affluence – with increasing purchasing power and the opportunity to consume more, individuals will do so (Fischer, 2003; Martin, 1999) – others argue that this orientation must be explained as one of the achievements of modernity (Slater, 1997). As Weber observes: 'A [person] does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he [or she] is accustomed to live and earn as much as is necessary for that purpose' (1930: 60). In modern consumer societies, acquiring new goods has become part of the 'accustomed' way of living (Campbell, 1992). Historians show that this was a social accomplishment. Susan Strasser (1999) demonstrates

that the rise of a consumer society required the construction of the 'old', that ideas of trash and obsolescence were needed to replace the recycling and reuse that was the norm. Importantly, status considerations of the appropriate standard of living in a modern society played no small part in that process of moving from a recycling to a consuming society. Thus, consumers began to acquire a constant stream of new goods only after the social and symbolic machinery was in place to produce a constant stream of waste that could make room for the new. Once established, that machinery became part of consumers' habits and their taken-for-granted expectations, their cosmology about how a modern life is organized.

The *habitus* of modern consumption thus accommodates change as a disposition towards the acquisition of new goods, and shapes positional consumption as new goods are sometimes status goods and often an essential part of maintaining a 'decent' standard of living. Part of the modern *habitus* is thus precisely shaped around managing novelty; modern actors are habitual actors, but they require a *habitus* that enables them to integrate unreflective with reflective action (Sabel, 1994).¹⁰

Finally, adoption of mass consumption may itself become a form of distinction, as expressed in the 'omnivore thesis' where higher-status consumers appreciate more categories of both 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' music than the working class (Peterson and Kern, 1996). As Douglas Holt (1997) argues, class distinction may manifest more in the modality of using goods than in the goods themselves, making a wide range of even mass consumption goods accessible to distinctive practices in a process that may link the *habitus* of mass consumption to the Bourdieuan *habitus* of class distinction.

AN AGENDA FOR RESEARCH

Understanding the role of habit in the relationship between consumption and inequality in the Veblenian tradition raises new questions for empirical research, and this is the most important contribution of the work of theoretical synthesis I have undertaken here. Future research should be more alert to the role of habit, convention, and routine in structuring positional consumption behavior. Many of the propositions discussed in this article have not been fully tested. Qualitative research on reference groups and the role of social exposure and social networks in encouraging comparative consumption might help identify the processes through which consumption patterns are diffused across classes. The old tradition of analyses of perceptions of the standard of living and budget analyses might be updated with modern surveys of consumer expenditure in order to

understand how consumption is similar and different across social groups, as well as how it changes over time (for some efforts in this direction see Brown, 1994; Dwyer, forthcoming; Katz-Gerro and Talmud, 2005). Perhaps most important, theorizing the role of habit in positional consumption prompts questions about how the overall structure of stratification shapes broad patterns of consumption and perceptions of the standard of living. These questions are different from those typically pursued in studies of consumption and stratification, especially those focused on class distinction in the Bourdieuan tradition.

For example, did rising inequality in the USA lead to upscaling in consumer spending and perceptions of the standard of living across income?¹¹ Theories of comparative consumption suggest the answer depends on the dynamics of emulation and whether reference groups have shifted over time. If reference groups or information about relative positions (such as the location of the 'middle' price) have moved up the income scale as Schor (1998) and Frank (1999) argue, there should be widespread upscaling, and they do present evidence that this is occurring. Both focus their attention, however, on aggregate consumption statistics – undifferentiated by class or income level, which is key to assessing where the change occurs – or on middle-class and affluent consumers, raising questions about what is happening across the income scale. In an empirical study of consumption patterns across different income levels, Dwyer (2007) finds evidence of both upscaling and increasing disparities in the standard of living in housing in the USA. Others argue that consumption patterns have remained remarkably stable and point to little increase in consumption inequality over the period that income inequality increased (Slesnick, 2001). More research is needed to resolve these conflicting claims. While the microfoundations of the influence of habit on consumer behavior may be difficult to test, theoretical propositions about that relationship lead to predictions about the influence of inequality on aggregate consumption and perceptions of the standard of living that can be tested.

The recent financial crises in modern capitalist economies make improving understanding of consumption and stratification even more urgent. The easy availability of credit in the 1990s and 2000s provided opportunities for rising consumption in the context of rising inequality. Indeed, Leicht and Fitzgerald (2006) argue that the middle class has been 'lent what it should have been paid' and that a middle-class lifestyle was maintained during a time of stagnant income growth for many at the cost of financial security. Rising indebtedness may be fueled by the habitual, taken-for-granted expansion of the standard of living and the influence of

social comparison. Since most take on credit card debt in relatively small increments without serious forethought, consumers may find themselves becoming habituated to a certain level of indebtedness as a taken-for-granted part of the standard of living (Ritzer, 1995). This raises yet another connection between stratification and consumption as spending practices affect net worth and wealth stratification.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that the Veblenian tradition of positional consumption theories offers important insights into modern consumer culture that deserve greater attention in contemporary research. By highlighting the more complex mechanisms proposed to propel positional consumption – including habitual practices and not only deliberate competitive consumption – this article illustrates that studies in this area need not be economic or rely on unrealistic conceptions of the consumer actor. In fact, these theories posit deeply social processes that should be studied and understood, in part because they may bear most on some of the most important questions about how consumption relates to stratification structures in modern capitalist societies.

When the role of habit in positional consumption theories is foregrounded, attention is focused much more on mass consumption and the social content of the standard of living rather than luxury consumption and distinctive patterns between social groups. It is in concepts of the standard, the middle, the aspiration to decencies and comforts, that we see habitual action most discussed in theories of positional consumption, even including the importance of newness and change in mass consumption. The analysis of the role of habit in structuring class emulation in this article demonstrates that stratification processes can, however, still be quite central to the structuring of consumption even as distinctions appear to erode. First, some goods may represent the past result of class competition, now habitually incorporated into the standard of living and still having effects through overall consumption levels. Second, the importance of maintaining position may still drive much consumption, in part through the relatively unreflective effect of social comparison, and the broadly positional utility of the standard of living in representing the accomplishment of a certain level of 'decency.' Finally, mass consumption may be incorporated into the modern *habitus* of consumption in ways not contradictory to distinctive ends. Though we cannot always empirically test the micro-conditions of choice and parse the contribution of habitual versus deliberate action, the more complex and nuanced vision of positional consumption

uncovered here demonstrates that the standard of living is a social fact that needs explaining with the tools of sociological analysis.

Pushing forward empirical work on positional consumption is important not only for refining theory, but also because the findings will have important implications for public policy and considerations of social justice. Though I have not emphasized it here, many in the Veblenian tradition worry that positional consumption patterns shaped by stratification structures in turn become stratifying as they encourage indebtedness and personal consumption to the exclusion of important alternative public and private goods such as education, leisure, environmental conservation, and many others (Frank, 1999; Schor, 1998). These questions are all the more important as financial crises in modern capitalism are increasingly affected by household-level consumption as debt at that level is bundled and insured and traded across markets (Gotham, 2006). Determining the use and distribution of the social surplus is one of the most important concerns faced by modern democracies, and here perhaps we would desire the application of careful deliberation rather than leaving the results to the force of habit.

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Notes

1. Scholars have also used concepts similar to the *habitus* to describe the emergence of coherent sets of consuming patterns within particular status groups. For example, Alan Warde (2005) links theories of practice to consumption and argues that there are social groups, such as car hobbyists, that are structured around and defined by a particular set of consumption practices that help give meaning and identity to group involvement, but that also become taken-for-granted and habitual in their operation.
2. While this does necessarily follow from Bourdieu's theory, the greater attention to distinction and minimization of emulation has produced a different research agenda. One example of the influence of a process like emulation on mass phenomena in Bourdieu's (1984) work is his analysis of credential inflation as more people from more class backgrounds seek higher education.
3. Moskowitz (2004) notes that, at the same time, scholars in the USA began conducting budget studies of the middle class that had previously only been done for the working class, evidence of the increasing similarity in how consumption by different classes came to be viewed by many scholars in this period.
4. Most goods that follow this trajectory also become cheaper over time, a largely technical process that is encouraged by demand for the good across income levels. It is also important to note that distinctions often remain in the quality of these goods – the difference between a Mercedes versus a Pontiac for example, though

- this is still narrower than the difference between owning versus not owning a car. Of course, some goods remain luxuries over long periods (Fischer and Hout, 2004).
5. Of course, Schor (1992) also argues that the political economic structure does not easily allow the trade-off of productivity for leisure in the USA, in contrast to some European countries.
 6. In a similar argument, Veblen (1994[1899]) posits that people have an 'instinct' to emulate, a notion that is close to psychological conceptions of habit as reflex and suggests that emulation occurs without deliberation (Camic, 1986; Campbell, 1995). Frank uses the concept of contagion as a metaphor for these kinds of influences, an idea that marketers also have adopted (Gladwell, 2000). The idea is that our social natures make us 'susceptible' to other people's practices without even being aware of it. But these rather psychological notions also contain more sociological content. Especially in Frank's analysis, habitually conformist consumption is one way to maintain position in an unequal society where the stratification boundaries are not always clear and yet the stakes are reasonably high.
 7. Typically positional consumption theories focus on the emulation of higher status groups (Duesenberry, 1949; Simmel, 1957; Veblen, 1994[1899]; Schor 1998). Many have observed that emulation sometimes seems to flow down a hierarchy instead of up, as when 'street' fashion becomes high fashion, and this is likely related to very different processes (Campbell, 1992). It is important to note, however, that even fashions adopted from marginalized groups are typically altered in becoming markers of distinction. A classic example is blue jeans, originally the apparel of blue-collar workers – and yet few would mistake high-fashion jeans for the pants worn by construction labor.
 8. Moskowitz (2004) also details how corporations attempted to sell their products as being part of the standard of living, in part through standardization, so that the qualities of a good could be counted on to deliver the status content as well as whatever use value was on offer.
 9. The notion of the standard of living as a conventional widely accepted and socially defined level of living rather than an absolute standard in fact goes back to classical economists such as Adam Smith as well as Karl Marx (Moskowitz 2004). However, the older views were framed in terms of the floor for wages in society rather than consumption behavior and did not specify a mechanism for how ideas about the standard became widely accepted.
 10. Camic (1986) makes a similar point about Weber's use of *habitus*. He argues that Weber's Protestant ethic thesis can be interpreted to propose that Calvinism developed a new and distinctive *habitus* that facilitated capitalist development so that 'in this sense, modern rational action itself rests, for Weber, on a foundation of habit: on a dynamic *habitus* that supplants the stasis *habitus* that underlies simple habitual action.' (Camic 1986: 1064).
 11. This approach would not test the microfoundations of the claims about the role of habit in positional consumption. This is an important area for research, but there are also limits to our ability to empirically examine subjective consumer motivations. We can, however, examine questions and expectations that derive from those microfoundations. This approach has the same form as analyses that examine class differences in consumption patterns in order to assess Bourdieu's

theory of distinction without attempting to test microfoundations of that theory such as the character of consumption as a love of class fate or the embodiment of practices (e.g. Katz-Gerro, 2002).

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