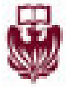
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Poststructuralist Lifestyle Analysis: Conceptualizing the Social Patterning of Consumption in Postmodernity

DOUGLAS B. HOLT*

In the sociology of consumption, a core research issue is the symbolic expression, reproduction, and potential transformation of social collectivities through consumption. The two theoretical perspectives that have long dominated both consumer research and sociological investigations of this class of research questions—what I term personality/values lifestyle analysis and object signification research—have become less useful in the postmodern era. In this study, I develop an alternative poststructuralist approach for analyzing lifestyles. I describe five core principles of poststructuralist lifestyle analysis that distinguish this approach from the two predominant paradigms. Drawing from a series of unstructured interviews, I argue that each of these five features allows for more nuanced description of lifestyles than the two predominant approaches. Poststructuralist lifestyle analysis can be used to unravel the social patterning of consumption according to important social categories such as social class, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, and generation in advanced capitalist countries in which postmodern cultural conditions make tracing these patterns difficult with conventional approaches.

Since the founding of the discipline, sociologists have sought to understand how consumption patterns express, reproduce, and potentially transform social collectivities.[1] Thorstein Veblen (1899) inveighed wryly against the invidious pecuniary comparisons signaled by the conspicuous consumer goods and leisure activities of the wealthy. Georg Simmel (1900, [1904] 1957) discussed the importance of lifestyles as an exemplary feature of modern urban life he witnessed in fin de siècle Berlin and described how the dynamic of style was driven by the trickle-down emulation of elites. Max Weber (1978) viewed consumption as a distinctive domain of life in which stratified relationships are formed and sustained on the basis of style rather than position in the labor market. Building on these initial statements, volumes of empirical research conducted in the 1920s through the 1960s repeatedly demonstrated that consumption served as a fertile domain for social classification (e.g., the influential studies of W. Lloyd Warner [Warner (1949) 1960], Lee Rainwater, and Richard Coleman [Rainwater and Coleman 1978] on social class and consumption). But, since the 1970s, this research tradition has all but disappeared in marketing and has also faded in sociology. Common academic wisdom attributes this decline to the diminishing influence of social conditions in structuring consumption patterns in advanced capitalist societies such as the contemporary United States (DiMaggio 1987; Schouten and

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[1]Collectivities are groups of people who have been socialized in similar conditions (e.g., similarities in parents, peer groups, education, jobs, exposure to mass media), are embedded in similar social relations (e.g., how they are treated by other societal groups and social institutions), and so tend to have similar cultural understandings. Collectivities, then, are a particular type of group that is more macroscopic (i.e., exists at a higher level of aggregation) than groups such as families, organizations, or peer groups that are based on sustained interaction. Collectivities are not formally organized, and the common characteristics that unite a collectivity are often widely dispersed across space (Rossi 1988). One important characteristic of collectivities, then, is that membership is not necessarily a conscious phenomenon (i.e., collectivities can operate separate from members' self-understanding). Another important characteristic of collectivities is that they are constituted and sustained through social processes—they are socially constructed. Thus, just because people share a common demographic characteristic does not mean that they form a collectivity. For example, in the first half of this century, Italian-, Irish-, and German-Americans were important collectivities. But as the social patterns that led to common cultures broke down, and as the influx of non-European immigrants made specific intra-European identities less economically and politically consequential, these ethnic categories have become primarily nostalgic markers rather than true collectivities.

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McAlexander 1995; Wells 1974), which is often attributed to postmodern cultural conditions in which systematic relationships between social categories and consumer behaviors are breaking down (see, e.g., Baudrillard 1988; Featherstone 1991).

A foundational premise of this study is that there is an alternative explanation for the decline in research describing the social patterning of consumption. I draw on a group of contemporary social theorists who have suggested that social collectivities continue to structure consumption patterns (and vice versa), but in increasingly subtle ways. To study these patterns successfully requires an analytic approach that highlights nuanced differences in consumption. The purpose of this study, then, is to develop a new theoretical perspective that illuminates differences in consumption patterns that are usually obscured in existing approaches.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE SOCIAL PATTERNING OF CONSUMPTION

Personality/Values Lifestyle Research

In marketing, social consumption patterns have received attention because they often serve as a basis for market segmentation. Segmentation schemes evolved from simple sorting by social categories in the 1960s to more flexible, inductive techniques developed to capture the complex and fragmented consumption patterns emerging at this time in Western industrial societies (Wells 1974). In these studies, many dozens of intuitively selected activity, interest, and opinion questions (known as AIO inventories) are factor analyzed to cluster respondents into lifestyle categories. Instead of analyzing the relationship between social categories and consumption directly, then, lifestyle categories provide psychological profiles that aggregate a variety of social factors (e.g., VALS reports that the lifestyle category called Belongers tend to be lower income, female, older, and Anglo-Saxon and live in small towns and rural areas [Holman 1984]). Early applications of this approach often focused on lifestyles structured by social categories (e.g., social class [Myers and Gutman 1974] and gender [Douglas and Urban 1977]), but many applied studies were also conducted with no sociological grounding (Wells 1975). Similar studies have been conducted in sociology as well (e.g., Hughes and Peterson 1983; Marsden et al. 1982).

In response to extensive criticism of the lack of theoretical sophistication in early empirical work (Wells 1974, 1975; Wind 1978; Wind and Green 1974), subsequent studies sought to integrate lifestyle into existing personality and values theories (Kahle, Beatty, and Homer 1986; Lastovicka 1982; Mitchell 1983; Vinson, Scott, and Lamont 1977). Research conceptualizing lifestyle in the personality paradigm rests on the premise that lifestyles are behavioral expressions of personality traits (Lastovicka 1982; Mitchell 1983). This research maintains the AIO operationalization but assumes that AIO measures are reflections of internal psychological states that structure a person's behaviors across a wide variety of consumption and nonconsumption categories. Thus, in personality-based lifestyle studies, the AIO battery is used to abstract to the central consumption-related psychological dispositions of different groups.

Lifestyle research in the values paradigm relies on a similar assumption—that lifestyles are structured by quantitative differences in universal values across groups (Kahle et al. 1986; Kamakura and Mazzon 1991; Kamakura and Novak 1992; Novak and MacEvoy 1990). The Rokeach Values Survey and List of Values (LOV) have dominated recent lifestyle research, but these schemes are only the most recent incarnations of values/needs/motives typologies advanced in psychology, sociology, and anthropology since the 1920s. Like previous efforts, lifestyle researchers using the values paradigm draw from a short list of universal antecedents to human action to explain consumption patterns. Instead of inducting psychological traits from an amalgam of measures as does the personality approach, values research pursues a more deductive project in which people are sorted into lifestyle groups on the basis of their rankings or weightings of a priori values.

Although there are important differences between the personality and values approaches, they share many assumptions in conceptualizing the social patterning of consumption. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the two will be considered together and referred to as the personality/values approach to lifestyle analysis. In this approach, consumption patterns are conceived as regularities in consumer behaviors, operationalized as the consumption of particular categories of goods and participation in particular categories of leisure activities. Lifestyles, then, are conceptualized as shared consumption patterns spanning a variety of consumer categories (Wells 1974, 1975). Further, both approaches assume that these behavioral patterns are structured by differences in global psychological states such as values, traits, or dispositions (Anderson and Golden 1984; Lastovicka 1982; Mitchell 1983). These psychological states are abstracted from, and so necessarily devoid of any influence by, sociohistorical context. For example, VALS consists of universal developmental stages, and the constructs in the Rokeach and LOV schemes are conceived as psychic universals on which individuals vary in terms of weighting. Thus, the personality/values approach presumes that lifestyles are ahistorical and relatively stable phenomena.

Object Signification Research

While personality/values lifestyle analysis seeks to describe the psychological structuring of consumer behaviors, the other predominant theoretical framework for analyzing social patterns of consumption focuses on the patterning of object meanings (where "object" is defined broadly to include goods, activities, and events). In the object signification approach, consumption objects are

viewed as vessels of meanings that consumers acquire when they consume the object (see, e.g., Levy 1959; McCracken 1986; Mick 1986; Richins 1994). Empirical studies grounded in the object signification approach assume an essentialist conception of meaning: they presuppose that transcendental meanings (Derrida 1978)—meanings that transcend the particular sociohistorical context in which the consumption object is embedded—inhere naturally in individual objects or categories of objects.

One important class of meanings that objects express is social meaning: meanings that serve to represent and thus demarcate social categories such as gender, class, and race. Collectivities are expressed in consumption, then, by consumption objects that contain meanings marking the collectivity (Levy 1959, 1963; Lynd and Lynd [1929] 1956; Simmel 1957; Veblen [1899] 1970; Warner 1960). This view is implicit not only in discussions of individual consumption objects but also in concepts developed to describe aggregations of object meanings such as consumption constellations (Solomon and Assael 1987) and Diderot unities (McCracken 1988). In this view, members of a collectivity—for example, yuppies, punks, and manual laborers—are assumed to consume an ideal-typical assortment of consumption objects that express their identity. This view assumes that categories of consumption objects are imbued with distinct univocal meanings that appeal to some collectivities more than others. Since tastes, in this view, are conceived as preferences for particular categories of consumption objects, they can be inferred directly from object choices.

Although studies of social consumption patterns using object signification analysis are now rare in marketing, a number of influential studies in sociology over the past two decades are grounded in this theoretical perspective. Exemplary research using this approach has been conducted by Paul DiMaggio (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990; DiMaggio and Useem 1978) and Richard Peterson (Hughes and Peterson 1983; Peterson and DiMaggio 1975; Peterson and Simkus 1992). These studies typically draw from large-scale surveys analyzed with regression and factor analyses to investigate the relationship between patterns of cultural consumption (e.g., art, music) and social categories (e.g., race, social class).

A Poststructuralist Approach

The structuralist revolution that swept across the social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s demonstrated that meanings are relationally constituted—a concept (e.g., a chair, a lifestyle) is assigned meaning by a community of interpreters (e.g., consumers) through contrasts with other comparable concepts. These relational differences with other concepts together form a system (or web) of meanings. This system of meanings becomes realized in the world through homologous relationships with categories of people, places, times, and objects. For example, Sahlins (1976) describes how American conceptions of nature versus humanity structure views of the edibility of different animals. Since dogs and horses participate in American society as subjects, they are understood as inedible, while cows and pigs, which live apart from humans as objects, are edible. This principle—that edibility is inversely related to humanity—also influences the perceived edibility of different animal parts such as muscle tissue versus brains and hearts.

While Claude Levi-Strauss, the most influential figure in the structuralist movement, typically applied this type of relational analysis to myths, the early writings of both Jean Baudrillard (1988) and Roland Barthes ([1957] 1972, [1967] 1990) applied structuralist analyses to popular culture and its consumption. These enormously influential studies gradually diffused into American interpretive social science and, more recently, consumer research. As structuralist analysis evolved, the particular characteristics of symbolic systems and the degree to which interpreters are able to influence meanings provoked much theoretical disagreement, leading to alternative approaches such as deconstruction, poststructuralism, and reader-response theory. Nonetheless, the basic assumption of this approach—that meaning is an emergent property of systematic relations of difference—holds sway across the social sciences and humanities and has become a foundational assumption for cultural consumer research (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Levy 1981; Mick 1986; Sahlins 1976).

Structuralism proffers a view of culture as a closed, idealist, and often universal system of meanings that has a direct symmetric relation to people and objects in the world. Poststructuralist thinking, while maintaining the importance of relational difference, challenges structuralist presuppositions on a number of counts.[2] First, rather than assume that meanings exist fully formed prior to their expression in social life, poststructuralists argue that meanings are significantly constituted by the ways in which people act in particular social contexts (i.e., by "practice"; see, e.g., Bourdieu's [1977] damning critique of Levi-Strauss's structuralist view of gift giving). According to Derrida, structuralist interpretations fall prey to logocentrism: these supposedly objective meanings instead superimpose in disguised form the analyst's subjective position.

Second, meanings do not exist separate from history. Rather, meanings accrue as particular ways of thinking

[2]I have framed poststructuralism in opposition to structuralism here because this comparison foregrounds the key elements of poststructuralist thought that I use to advance a poststructuralist style of lifestyle analysis. However, it should be noted that poststructuralism also emerged in reaction to another totalizing narrative: modernist versions of Marxism. I ignore other distinctive characteristics of poststructuralism that are part of this trajectory. For example, Derrida and Foucault, who are pessimistic about the possibilities of modernist emancipatory projects, advocate excavation of the silenced voices of the social margins and the pursuit of culturally transgressive practices.

and acting become reified (i.e., perceived as objective reality rather than as constructed by the subject) while others do not. The meanings of a particular cultural object or action are always constructed—through a cultural process known as intertextuality—by metaphoric, imagistic, and narrative association with other cultural objects and practices that are part of the historically accumulated cultural resources of a collectivity. Thus, meanings are often conceived as endlessly referring symbolic chains (often referred to as discourses), rather than the Weberian/Parsonian metaphor of meaning webs or systems (see, e.g., Geertz 1973).

Third, meanings of objects and actions are never structured by a single abstracted semiotic system. Chains of meanings exist as multiple and overlapping resources from which social actors select, combine, and juxtapose. Thus, the meanings of a particular cultural object for a particular individual in a particular context are produced typically through negotiation between or syncretic combination of available discourses. So the meaning of any particular object or activity is inherently unstable and contingent since it is dependent on which meaningful linkages are made, an interpretive process that is necessarily underdetermined by the cultural objects themselves.

In addition to these general premises of poststructuralist theorizing, this article draws inspiration from a number of authors who have applied poststructuralism to analyze consumption: the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984) and his critics (Calhoun 1993; Certeau 1984; DiMaggio 1987; Hall 1992; Lamont 1992), the new cultural anthropology of consumption (Appadurai 1986; Friedman 1994; Miller 1987), cultural studies (Clarke 1991; Grossberg 1992; Hall et al. 1980; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1976), and social semiotics (Barthes 1990; Baudrillard 1988; Gottdiener 1995) to develop a new approach for studying social consumption patterns.

METHOD

I conducted an interpretive study to explore empirically whether poststructuralist lifestyle analysis can capture more nuanced differences in consumption patterns than the personality/values and object signification approaches. Following the lead of contemporary sociological and anthropological research, I used ethnographic interviewing to discern cultural patterns from detailed discussions of specific preferences and actions. Ethnographic interviewing is a particularly effective methodological strategy for examining consumption patterns since informal conversation in the dining room or living room of an informant's home parallels everyday situations in which people routinely talk about their likes and dislikes, their recent consumption experiences, and their dreams for the future.

Twenty-three adults participated in interviews conducted in June 1993 (see the Appendix for demographics). These informants were randomly selected from the telephone book in Centre County, a rural Pennsylvania county of approximately 125,000 residents dominated by one medium-sized university town (State College). Each potential informant was offered $30 to participate in an in-home interview, fill out a demographic questionnaire, and respond to a postinterview survey. About 20 percent of those contacted agreed to participate. The resulting sample provided significant variation across important social categories such as class, gender, generation, and life stage, while variation in race/ethnicity was limited because of the location of the study.

The interviews—which lasted an average of one hour and 40 minutes and ranged from one to three hours—were transcribed to yield over 900 pages of transcripts. In addition to these transcripts, the data examined in the analysis included observations made during the interviews (e.g., home and landscaping, furniture and interior decor, collections, and hobby materials). An interview guide was developed to allow for a discovery-oriented exploration of informants' tastes and consumer actions. In contrast to the phenomenological interviewing technique (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), the interview sought the evaluative criteria that informants use to talk about their consumption. Like the phenomenological interview, the technique encouraged informants to describe these criteria through rich descriptive details (e.g., stories, recountings, and hypotheticals) rather than through abstract rationalizations. This method is derived from a central axiom of poststructuralist social thought—that human actions are organized through the various discourses that we use to understand and talk about the world and our experiences therein. Because such discourses are assumed to exist largely as presuppositional understandings rather than explicit values or ideologies (Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1984), they cannot be directly accessed. Instead, grounded discussions of the topics of interest are gathered in sufficient quantity and detail to allow the researcher to infer the discourses in operation with a high level of redundancy within and across interviews (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994).

The interview covered consumption categories frequently associated with lifestyle—food, clothing, home decor and furnishings, music, television and movies, reading, the arts, sports, and hobbies. For each category, a wide range of questions was used to extract a rich and comprehensive description of the informant's tastes and actions. These questions queried informants about their tastes across a variety of genres and specific consumption objects in each category. Some questions also solicited discussion of how consumption varied across different situations (e.g., for eating: breakfast/lunch/dinner/snacks, home/take-out/restaurants, alone/family/guests, and weekdays/weekends/special occasions) and over time (e.g., how eating patterns changed with the addition of children). Emic terms used by informants were probed to elicit specific stories, recountings, stereotypes, and longings that together grounded the subjective meanings of these terms. These detailed discussions were then used to induct patterns of consumption across categories. Several weeks after the interview, I administered the 32-question

VALS survey (Mitchell [1983]; analyzed with the algorithm supplied by Beatty, Homer, and Kahle [1988]), which I use as a prominent representative of the personality/values approach.

In the next section, I detail five key principles of poststructuralist lifestyle analysis that distinguish it from both the personality/values and object signification approaches. Through analysis of the interview data, I demonstrate that each of these features can lead to a more nuanced description of social consumption patterns.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF POSTSTRUCTURALIST LIFESTYLE ANALYSIS

Consumption Patterns Are Structured by Contextualized Cultural Frameworks

Personality/values lifestyle analysis assumes that consumption patterns are structured cognitively by nomothetic traits, dispositions, or values that are assumed to describe the cognitive structures of all human populations. These subjective structures are conceptualized to exist at the highest level of the cognitive hierarchy (in the case of values) or at the most foundational level of personality (in the case of traits and dispositions), and so they are thought to organize behaviors across a wide variety of domains and situations (but see Grunert, Brunso, and Bisp 1993). Most object signification studies do not explicitly consider cognitive structures, but when they do (e.g., Levy's [1981] invocation of Levi-Straussian structuralism), they also assume that these structures are universal properties of mind that influence a broad swath of behaviors.

In contrast, social theorists argue for the importance of context in shaping cultural understandings (i.e., culture instantiated in the mind as subjective perspectives—the terminological equivalent to cognitive and affective structures in cultural research). Sociologists such as Durkheim, Parsons, Luhmann, and Habermas argue that modern industrialized societies are characterized by a decoupling of institutional domains of social life such as education, politics, the law, and religion. Because social and cultural structures are mutually constitutive, this institutional fragmentation of society results in a cognitive analogue—cultural understandings that are organized at the institutional level. Bourdieu (1984) argues that in modern societies, consumption, too, is a relatively autonomous institution (or field) in which people's actions are structured by cultural frameworks of tastes that have developed in the field.

From a somewhat different perspective, cultural theorists in anthropology and cultural studies demonstrate that cultural understandings take distinctive shape (i.e., are "articulated" to express a qualitatively distinct character) because of their specific historical trajectories in a given social milieu. Clifford Geertz terms this local knowledge, arguing that the contextual characteristics of cultural understandings are central to their meaning (Geertz [1983]; see Miller [1987] for an application of this argument to consumption). In a comparative study of religion, for instance, he demonstrates that in Indonesia and Morocco, Islam developed into two entirely different systems of religious meanings as Islamic beliefs and rituals were interpreted in terms of, and made to do effective symbolic work in, the culture of each society (Geertz 1968). Similarly, in his demonstration that the Balinese and Moroccans have different notions of self-concept, Geertz argues that people "do not float as bounded psychic entities detached from their backgrounds"; rather, "self" is a socially and historically bounded concept for which its "attributes they borrow from their setting" (1983, p. 67). The arguments of Geertz and the poststructuralist cultural theorists who followed him suggest, then, that conceptualizing the cognitive structures that orient consumption patterns as contextualized, local understandings rather than decontextualized, nomothetic values or traits allows for a richer, more nuanced description of the cultural patterning of consumption (see Holt [1995b] for a more comprehensive version of this argument).

I compare analyses of the data that result from these contrasting theoretical premises to assess their relative usefulness in describing the subjective structuring of consumption patterns. I use VALS as an exemplar of techniques that assume that lifestyles are organized by decontextualized, nomothetic values, personality traits, or dispositions. Of the 23 informants, 10 are categorized by the VALS survey as Belongers (Bel), nine are Experientials (Exp), one is a Sustainer (Sus), one is an I-Am-Me (IAM), two are Socially Conscious (Soc), and none are categorized as Survivors, Emulators, Achievers, or Socially Integrated. The distribution of these categories is not surprising given that the sample is from a rural university town and lacks the lowest and highest class positions: Emulators are highly urban, Achievers tend to live in suburbs or large cities, Sustainers and Survivors draw heavily from the lower class, and the Socially Integrated are typically upper middle to upper class. Since the Belonger lifestyle has the most adherents, I used this group for the comparative analysis. Belongers "are more interested in fitting in than standing out. For them, it is important to know their place and what is expected of them. . . . Belongers will exert a lot of effort seeing to it that everyone performs up to expectations" (Holman 1984, p. 43). The main inference from the Belonger personality to the field of consumption is that since Belongers need to fit in, they will express tastes for traditional and conventional over new and different products (Mitchell 1983, p. 91).

I conducted an interpretive analysis of these 10 informants to interpret their traditional values from a contextualized cultural perspective rather than as a nomothetic construct. In other words, instead of treating traditionalism as a concept with a single objective meaning, I allowed for the possibility that informants could have dif-

ferent understandings of what is traditional that are structured by social contextual differences. I then compare the descriptive usefulness of this poststructuralist analysis to the VALS analysis: Do the traditional tastes of the Belonger personality structure similarities in consumption among those classified as Belongers and distinguish them from those who are otherwise classified? Or, alternatively, is consumption organized by local cultural frameworks that are elided in the process of abstracting to global personality constructs? (A brief caveat is that the cultural frameworks constructed in this analysis are far from exhaustive—a key axiom of poststructuralism developed below—and are intended as an empirical illustration of a theoretical argument. Although these categories are suggestive, a substantive description would require a more extensive and detailed analysis than I have provided here.)

As VALS suggests, the 10 belongers share certain global values, particularly in terms of their adherence to what in the United States are considered to be conservative social and moral values: a focus on self-determination and work ethic, the importance of the nuclear household and traditional family roles, and an explicit moral code concerning honesty and humility. However, these abstracted values play a limited role in organizing consumption. Rather than a single group of traditional consumers, the interpretive analysis revealed three different clusters, each reflecting a different organizing principle structuring what is traditional about their consumption. Further, these three cultural frameworks are shared by informants whom VALS classifies in categories other than Belonger:

Cluster 1: Canonical Aesthetics. An important cultural framework that organizes the consumption patterns of Harry, Ralph, and Jessica—two retired professors and the well-educated wife of a physics professor—is based on tastes central to the traditional canon of Western thought and aesthetics. Harry has a great affinity for Shakespeare and British serials on PBS and hates rock music and network sitcoms because they are "dumb." Ralph is similar but more highbrow, voicing admiration for Western ideals in the arts and letters. He talks at length about how one ought to present oneself in public, advocating "smart" clothing that always includes a jacket and tie. He enjoys listening to classical music, reading history, engaging in "intelligent and important" conversation, and anything associated with higher learning. Jessica has lived a cosmopolitan life, following her husband to academic jobs in northern California, Boston, and Hamburg. She delights in the excitement and intellectual vibrancy of those locales. Her chief avocations are weaving and gardening. She has an enormous loom in her living room and pursues weaving as a scholarly and creative activity, attending conferences, exchanging notes with other weavers, and inventing new techniques. Similarly, her gardening interests are predominantly aesthetic—she plays the role of artist, orchestrating the various colors and textures throughout the season with her garden design. The middle- and highbrow tastes of these three informants have more in common with Matthew (Exp), Betsy (Exp), Janet (Soc), and Randy (Soc) than with the other seven Belongers.

Cluster 2: Nurturing Mother. One important cultural framework organizing the consumption patterns of Sarah, who has three children, and Melissa, who has six children, is a nurturing "ethic of care" framework in which tastes are centered in the home and focused on raising and pleasing their children. In both interviews, questions regarding the informant's tastes were frequently interpreted in terms of the family and the children rather than the mother. Sarah still feels like a stranger in the town she has lived for 15 years since much of her time outside of her part-time job is spent in the house or escorting her children to their various after-school activities. As a result, much of our discussion focuses on television and cooking, particularly recounting the difficulties adjusting to her youngest child's recent vegetarianism. Her recent divorce has been emotionally devastating since her whole life has centered on her children and husband. Melissa describes with great pride and in substantial detail her average day, which is completely focused on managing the lives of her six children. With the exception of reading and antiques, virtually every response in the interview—for food, clothing, interior decor, television, music, and leisure activities—is quickly repositioned to describe her preferences for the kids and how these compare with the kids' own tastes. When forced to address her individual tastes, she positions her desires (e.g., to take guitar lessons or to acquire more expensive furniture) as "dreams" not worth even considering at present given the needs of her children—"wrestling camp comes first." She emphasizes repeatedly that raising her children is her primary mission and talks with great love about the time she is able to spend with her children; every nice summer day, she spends the afternoon playing with them at a local park. These two informants' child-focused tastes are much more similar to other informants who are mothers with children at home—Nancy (Exp), Diane (Sus), and Louise (IAM)—than to the other eight Belongers.

Cluster 3: Jeffersonian America. An important cultural framework of tastes organizing the consumption patterns of Ginger, Sam, Kristen, and Dorene is based on an appropriation of the styles, traditions, and temperament of pastoral America as memorialized by Jefferson. Ginger is a retiree who spends a great deal of time quilting, has an enormous garden and orchard where she grows fruits and vegetables that she cans for winter use, plays cards several times a week with her neighbors, and spends vacation time fishing at her nearby cabin because it is so relaxing. Sam, recently remarried and laid off from his defense industry job, pursues a life of simplicity and pragmatism. He has an enormous yard that he enjoys mowing while drinking beer and is an enthusiastic barbecuer. On weekends, he enjoys driving around the countryside, a pursuit he describes as peaceful. In the summer, he and

his wife spend every weekend at their camper-trailer, which is located in a scenic area in the next valley where they read and ''watch the grass grow.'' For vacations, they enjoy taking off in their camper to visit places of historical interest (their retirement dream is to travel in an RV for six months of every year). He likes ''real'' entertainment: for example, Tom Clancy novels, the Discovery channel, and stock car racing. Kristen is a craftsperson who sews and needlepoints, decorates in a ''country'' style, has recently become an avid country-western dancer (she and her husband founded a local dancing club), enjoys attending Penn State sporting events, likes living in Centre County to have her family nearby, and would like to move into the country so they could live in a log home and have horses. Dorene ran a ceramics shop in her garage for 22 years. Now she is an avid antiquer (as described below) who loves the Victorian and country styles, which she combines in her house. She enjoys just about anything associated with historic America: for example, she favors old black-and-white movies to new releases and often wears Victorian clothing to go out to dinner. She and her husband like to keep busy with projects—now they are remodeling several rooms in their house and landscaping the backyard. In their pursuit of activities often associated with historic and rural America to which they bring an easygoing and pragmatic orientation, these four informants have much more in common with Mary (Exp) than with the other six Belongers.

Although the VALS-designated Belongers share certain values that may be glossed as traditional, the inference that, therefore, they will consume similarly is not supported by these interviews. ''Traditional'' is not an objective, univocal term and, so, gives little descriptive guidance by itself. Traditional in what sense? Compared with whom? The distinctive characteristics of these 10 informants' tastes are governed not by whether they are traditional but by how they conceive of ''traditional'' with respect to tastes. In fact, the consumption patterns of each of these three groups of informants have more in common with other non-Belongers who have similar contextualized cultural understandings than with other Belongers who share their abstract values but who are very different consumers. Although personality/values lifestyle analysis captures some underlying commonalities across respondents, the extreme data reduction required to identify commonalities at the level of personality and values requires abstracting away many details of the informants' tastes that are essential for describing the cultural structuring of consumption patterns.

Cultural frameworks of tastes are contextual, subjective structures—they are constructed over time through interpersonal and mediated interaction in a particular sociohistorical setting. Thus, differences in cultural frameworks across groups are dominated by qualitative differences (e.g., the different understandings of ''tradition'' in this example that lead to different values and actions) rather than quantitative differences in rankings of universal, invariant constructs as is typical in values research (see Holt 1995b). Contemporary cultural theory describes the subjective dimension of culture as taken-for-granted, intersubjectively shared interpretive frameworks (e.g., metaphors, narratives, images, prototypes, and semantic structures) that serve four complementary functions: they represent the world, create and sustain cultural entities (such as consumption objects and activities), orient one to do certain things, and evoke certain feelings (D'Andrade 1984). Cultural frameworks are not specific rules or scripts (cf. Schank and Abelson 1977). Rather, they are abstracted, transposable, generative frameworks that people draw from to improvise their actions across a wide range of activities (Bourdieu 1984; Sewell 1992). For example, rather than a uniform set of preferences, the cultural framework of traditional motherhood is better conceived as a fuzzy set of metaphors, narratives, and images about the relationship between motherhood, self-preferences, and children's preferences that become crystallized and embellished in particular contexts. For example, traditional motherhood tastes are differentially inflected depending on whether the mother must work for economic reasons (see Thompson's [1996] description of the juggling lifestyle of middle-class working mothers). For Melissa, a stay-at-home mother, traditional motherhood tastes are conceived in terms of continual interaction with and service to her children, while for divorced working mother Sarah these tastes are inflected by notions of ''quality time'' and the desire to be flexible about her own preferences in order to allow her children's tastes to blossom in their peer social circles. In contrast to personality/values measures that abstract to transsituational cognitive structures, cultural frameworks include perspectives for understanding and models for acting that account for commonly experienced situations such as these.

Cultural frameworks of tastes, then, organize interpretations of consumption objects and how they are consumed, give meaning to consumption objects, constitute the desirability of consumption objects and the preferred ways of consuming them, and structure the felt experience of consuming. For example, Cluster 1 is distinguished by an aesthetic cultural framework that interprets consumption objects in terms of artistic innovation, formal beauty, and edification. These informants confer meaning on consumption objects on the basis of these aesthetic concerns: ''quality'' television, which expresses the complexities of human nature in an aesthetically pleasing manner, is opposed to ''popular'' television, which deals in superficial characters and cheap emotional ploys. Consumer actions are structured by the desire to experience intellectual stimulation, beauty, and creativity in consumption activities—from taking walks to weaving to reading to choosing home decor. Things of exquisite beauty and intellectual rigor evince awe and reverence, while consumption objects deemed mundane and mindless evoke disdain.

Cluster 2 shares a traditional motherhood cultural framework that interprets consumption activities in terms of their ability to satisfy children and to develop them

emotionally, intellectually, and experientially. In this framework, children's needs and preferences supersede all others. These informants ascribe meaning to consumption objects on the basis of their benefits for kids, the degree to which they reduce the parental burden to deliver these benefits, and the degree to which they are deemed tolerable for parents' consumption. Parents' favorite foods are those that are easy to prepare, that kids like, that are healthy, and that the parents do not get (too) sick of; quality entertainment (e.g., watching Disney videos for preadolescents) consists of activities that keep children's attention for significant spans of time, that instill good values, and that parents can tolerate. Activities that are edifying, that make the children happy, and that bring together parents and children evoke feelings of intense joy, while activities that kids love but the parent thinks are unsuitable result in frustration.

The Jeffersonian America cultural framework used by those in Cluster 3 interprets consumption options in terms of pragmatism and historical tradition in opposition to the commodification and aestheticization of goods and activities prevalent in contemporary American life. These informants confer object meanings based on these pragmatic, historical rural American ideals: practical activities are valued for their utilitarian outcome (e.g., produce, quilts, game, and woodworking), relaxing activities are part of a simpler rural way of life, country-style decorating is the contemporary reinterpretation of home interiors from the nation's pastoral past. Raising a prodigious vegetable garden and canning the harvest evokes feelings of pride, while watching a television program such as *Roseanne* that conflicts with the Jeffersonian ethos is disturbing.

This analysis provides evidence that conceiving of the subjective structuring of consumption patterns as contextualized cultural frameworks of tastes allows for a more nuanced analysis, revealing similarities and differences between consumers that are elided in approaches based on highly abstracted global traits or values.

Consumption Patterns Consist of Regularities in Consumption Practices

A foundational assumption of the object signification approach is that social meanings are located in the consumption object (Kleine and Kernan 1991; Levy 1959, 1981; Mick 1986; Richins 1994). Thus, anyone who consumes the same category or brand of object is partaking in the same meaning (to greater or lesser extent, depending on the success of their symbolic consumption and in addition to any idiosyncratic meanings they may also construct). Perhaps the most influential exposition of this position is McCracken's (1986) heuristic model of the movement of cultural meaning through marketing and consumption. In this model, consumption objects are viewed as semiotic containers in which various cultural codes are embedded by cultural producers using marketing techniques. Consumers engage in a variety of symbolic actions to acquire, use, and enhance these object meanings for their personal symbolic projects, but they do not have a qualitative impact on what the consumption object expresses.

In the personality/values approach, consumption patterns are patterns of consumer behaviors—regularities over time in categories of goods owned and activities pursued. For instance, Achievers tend to own patio furniture at a higher than average rate (Mitchell 1983). Patio furniture is assumed to express the Achiever lifestyle regardless of how it is understood and used. So, to take a hypothetical example, the behavioral view would not distinguish between people who understand patio furniture as an expression of middle-class comfort and success and so use it primarily as exterior ornamentation supplemented by an occasional ritualized family meal and others, such as ethnic minorities and working-class people, who think of the patio as a social hub and use it for continual informal, often unplanned gatherings for extended families and friends. Since neither the object signification nor the personality/values approach allows for the possibility that consumers may vary in terms of how they understand and use consumption objects, they both necessarily presume that consumption objects act as containers of social meaning. Since this metaphor suggests that there is a one-to-one correspondence between consumption objects and social meanings, these approaches infer lifestyle from the constellations of objects people consume.

Alternatively, in the poststructuralist approach, consumption patterns are expressed through regularities in consumption practices rather than in consumer objects. Beginning with Weber's initial outline of cultural sociology—and forcefully reasserted by Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz, and Michel Foucault, among others—social theorists have argued that human actions are always meaning laden—embedded with understandings and intentions. The term "practice" is often used to emphasize that human actions are not merely physical behaviors disconnected from thoughts (as the term "consumer behavior" is often used) but, rather, have meanings embodied in them (Holt 1995a; Thompson et al. 1989). From this perspective, consumption patterns are underdetermined by behaviors because people can understand, and thus consume, the same consumption object in many different ways. Instead, consumption patterns are conceived as regularities in how people consume. This assumption is consistent with the discussion of cultural frameworks of tastes above: similarities in consumption practice imply that similar cultural frameworks are applied to the act of consumption, while this inference often does not hold for similarities in consumer behaviors.

For the container model to be a reasonable simplifying assumption requires that the institutional and formal properties of consumption objects highly constrain their meanings and uses (as Bourdieu [1984] sometimes seems to argue). However, empirical research in a variety of disciplines has shown conclusively that consumption objects

typically allow for a wide variety of interpretations and uses. For example, mass communications researchers have demonstrated that soap operas are consumed in dramatically different ways depending on the social class and ethnicity of the viewer (Liebes and Katz 1990; Press 1991). Thus, consumption objects are better understood as polysemic symbolic resources that allow for significant variation in consumer interpretation and use.

This practice-based conception of consumption patterns has powerful implications for the sociology of consumption. If, typically, there is not a one-to-one relationship between consumption objects and their social meanings and uses, then it is necessary to investigate consuming from an intersubjective rather than an object-based perspective if we are to plumb consumption patterns fully. Since a given consumption object can be consumed in a variety of ways depending on the cultural frameworks that people apply when they interact with the object, describing consumption patterns requires a focus on patterns of practices (which include how consumers understand, evaluate, appreciate, and use consumption objects in particular contexts) rather than just patterns of behaviors (which do not). Further, since objects are polysemous resources, this implies that shared consumption patterns need not necessarily involve consuming the same set of consumption objects.

The object and practice conceptions of consumption patterns can be examined empirically by analyzing the consumption of a single category of consumption objects. How useful is it to analyze social consumption patterns by clustering those who consume in the same category? An interesting example from the interviews involves home furnishings. Nine informants voiced a preference for antique furniture, and four spoke extensively about antiques and have a number of antiques in their houses. The personality/values approach would characterize these informants' interest in and ownership of antiques as the same consumer behavior, particularly in the case of the four informants who are the most active antiques consumers. An object signification analysis may or may not discriminate between these informants, depending on the detail of analysis: if antiques is the most specific category used, the four informants would be clustered. If different types of antiques are thought to have different meanings, then the informants may be distinguished to some extent since their antiques differ somewhat in style. In the practice-based view of the poststructuralist approach, on the other hand, it is critical to examine how these informants consume antiques.

Bargain Antiquing. Dorene and her husband have recently become ravenous antiquers, using all of their free time to scavenge the countryside for antiques. Entering their modern colonial-style home, Dorene escorts me into a newly partitioned room that is stuffed with antiques and Victorian memorabilia of various sorts—books, clothing, photos, and knickknacks. Visitors are so engulfed with paraphernalia that social uses are severely restricted. Rather, the room serves as a public showpiece for the owners' antiques. The only other room decorated with antiques is the master bedroom, but she discusses her plans for converting other rooms to a "period look." Dorene and her husband take overnight trips every weekend, attending auctions and sales throughout the mideastern states in search of great deals. They also frequent local yard sales and auctions when the weather keeps them at home, filing lowball bids on desirable items with the auctioneers before moving on to another sale. She shows little interest in the cultural side of antiques—their classification, aesthetic features, and history. Reluctant to describe her particular tastes in antiques, she instead offers me a coffee-table book she just purchased describing the Victorian period. When describing her purchases, she does not offer a single example of an antique that is personally meaningful to her. Instead, she talks at length about the process of acquisition. In particular, she is most proud of the antiques that she bought for "a steal"—for example, a beautiful Victorian love seat was purchased for $22.

Learning to Be a Connoisseur. Melissa's taste in antiques is specifically for primitives, and she has a number of antiques of this style in her house. Her entranceway is dominated by an enormous spinning wheel, and her living room contains a hutch, dry sink, and trunk of the same style. These pine pieces were constructed by farmers and local craftsmen with little formal training using simple, nondecorative designs. In addition, Melissa commissioned a local craftsperson to make a coffee table that mimics the primitive style. She talks longingly about acquiring other pieces of primitive furniture, such as a corner cabinet, that she greatly admires but cannot afford. Melissa loves to learn about the history and styles of American antiques and clearly gets much satisfaction in using her own pieces as a resource for sharing this knowledge with others. She is fascinated by architectural and furniture design and has many books on antiques and architectural history that she uses to educate herself. When child-rearing obligations ease, she would like to pursue interior design professionally.

Expressing Personal Aesthetics. Unlike Dorene and Melissa, Janet likes eclectic interiors that mix antiques and contemporary elements. She has definitive and detailed tastes for decor centered on expressing her own personal style. She cannot stand interiors in which the furnishings are coordinated, because there is no expression of personality. In choosing furnishings, she is looking for things that "don't interrupt"—"anything that's glaring or ostentatious or says its important is out of the question [because] houses should be a background for the people in them." Most important to her are "things that remind me of things rather than things that have their own intrinsic value. In other words, I'd rather put something on the wall that was painted by a friend . . . than something that an interior designer had just written up." Several

times in her adult life, she has divested herself of all her major possessions in order to re-create herself, consciously evoking a dramatic metaphor. While she has relatively few antiques, these are extremely important because they are among the few items that she has held onto to maintain some continuity across these different lives—"they remind me of where I came from." She spends several minutes in a very emotional discussion of one particularly meaningful antique—an enormous mahogany hutch that she had shipped to the United States when she moved here from Australia. "It was frightfully expensive, and I remember thinking 'What am I doing this for?' but I just did it because I wanted to. . . . I like having a few things from the past."

Bricoleur *Construction.* Sarah has acquired a number of antiques from garage sales and through friends. Her tastes in antiques are catholic since her interest is not focused on particular styles but, rather, on making desirable furniture out of seemingly worthless pieces. She describes in detail the acquisition of a beat-up, painted cupboard that was being used as a utility chest in a garage. She and her husband completely refinished the cupboard, leaving the nicks and scrapes that give it "character." Similarly, she proudly recounts how they constructed their kitchen table from an old door they found in the basement of a farm house they were renting, which they attached to a table frame from a discarded restaurant table.

While these four informants share the same consumer behavior, their consumption of antiques varies dramatically in its practice. For Dorene, antiques serve as concrete markers of both historic America and her family's recent financial success. By displaying these antiques in her house, she acquires and expresses these meanings. Since antiques, as she perceives them, so perfectly reflect this ethos, the more of them the better. Thus, with single-minded intensity, Dorene and her husband seek to acquire the best antiques (where "best" is defined predominantly in terms of monetary value) at the lowest price and then display them prominently.

Diametrically opposed to Dorene's, Melissa's antiques consumption focuses on the styles of furniture and a yearning to become expert in identifying and evaluating antiques—to become a connoisseur. So Melissa's antiques practices involve reading about the history and design of different styles and talking to other antique experts from whom she can learn. Janet's antiquing practices differ from both Dorene's and Melissa's. Unlike Dorene's consumption, strategic acquisition of economically valuable antiques is devalued in favor of serendipitous accumulation of personally meaningful antiques. In contrast to Melissa, she has developed a personalized, idiosyncratic view of the aesthetic qualities of antiques that she contrasts to lemming-like conformity to an accepted style. So while Janet has beautiful antiques, she does not consume them as antiques but rather as distinctive craft pieces that perfectly reflect her own individualized sensibilities. Sarah shares with Janet a view of antiques as personally meaningful rather than conventionally or economically valuable. However, unlike Janet, Sarah's interests are not primarily aesthetic. Rather, value accrues to the antique because she has created it; a *bricoleur,* Sarah searches out bits and pieces of otherwise valueless objects and tinkers with them to make them "antiques" that she enjoys because they are her creation.

The personality/values and object signification approaches conceive of consumption patterns in terms of what objects and activities are consumed. Both approaches, then, necessarily obscure differences in how people consume. Although this view may be useful for some marketing applications, its application to sociological research questions is suspect. To assume that collectivities are expressed only through particular objects contradicts recent research that demonstrates that collectivities are often expressed through distinctive practices rather than distinctive objects (Bourdieu 1984; Hebdige 1979; Press 1991). Consumption objects are malleable semiotic resources that different people can consume in different ways to enact their tastes. Thus, documenting the material reality of consumption (e.g., the ownership of an object, physical participation in a particular activity) cannot discriminate the extent to which consumer patterns are similar or divergent. Instead, in the poststructuralist view, analysis includes patterns not only of consumer behaviors but also of consumption practices—the particular ways in which people understand, evaluate, use, and appreciate consumption objects across different contexts (Holt 1995a).

Lifestyles Are Constructed by Symbolic Boundaries between Consumption Patterns

Both the object signification and personality/values approaches assume that lifestyles are shared consumption patterns. In the object signification approach, lifestyles are composed of sets of cultural objects assumed to have a distinctive social meaning marking those who consume the set (Levy 1959). For example, concepts such as consumption constellations (Solomon and Assael 1987) and Diderot unities (McCracken 1988) describe clusters of consumption objects that confer particular meanings on their consumers. The personality/values approach lacks an explicit conception of social meaning: consumption patterns are understood primarily in material rather than symbolic terms. Implicitly, however, this approach also assumes that social meanings are immanent to shared consumption patterns and, so, are readily interpretable by the researcher.

In contrast, from a poststructuralist perspective, consumption patterns have no immanent social meaning qua pattern. Instead, lifestyles are created by relational differences between consumption patterns—their meanings are constructed by and exist in these differences. For example, a consumption pattern that involves systematic denial of material abundance is meaningful as an ascetic lifestyle only to the extent that this pattern exists in opposition to

alternative lifestyles that include a consumption pattern based on hedonism and indulgence. Each consumption pattern creates meaning for the other by delineating what it is not. These symbolic differences between consumption patterns are a type of symbolic boundary (Barth 1969; Douglas 1966; Lamont 1992): differences in meanings, embedded in consumption practices, serve as a basis for affiliating with certain types of people and, likewise, as a resource for distinguishing oneself from others, reinforcing social positions (and because cultural and social structures are mutually constitutive, the inverse holds as well).

This theoretical distinction is important operationally for two reasons. First, it suggests that lifestyles are underdetermined by shared consumption patterns. Since a consumption pattern can express a variety of social meanings depending on the particular constellation of consumption patterns in which it is situated, measurement requires mapping these relations. Second, it suggests that consumption patterns can vary in the degree to which they are implicated in the expression of symbolic boundaries. Some patterns are central to the maintenance of the key boundaries that organize social categories such as class, gender, and race, while others are less consequential, and relationships between particular patterns and social categories are likely to vary across social contexts. In this view, lifestyle analyses need to press beyond the excavation of consumption patterns to investigate the symbolic boundaries that are drawn and maintained through these patterns.

I examined the interview data to evaluate whether construing lifestyle in relational terms allows for explication of lifestyles that would not be revealed by the alternative approaches. Consumption patterns implicated in symbolic boundaries are evinced in comments in which informants make grounded comparisons with other consumption patterns, granting respect for particular tastes while evincing distaste for others (see Holt, forthcoming; Lamont 1992). Because all personality/values and most object signification studies interpret consumption patterns in isolation from alternatives, they do not allow for this type of analysis. Although a handful of structuralist object signification studies also emphasize relational difference (e.g., Levy 1981), they focus on relationships between objects rather than between consumption practices.

Two symbolic boundaries that together demarcate four social-class-based lifestyles were the most salient in this investigation. Middle and working classes are symbolically bounded by differences in the social and geographic breadth of their cultural frameworks of taste. And dominant and dominated fractions in each class are delineated by a symbolic boundary based on cultural differences in tastes reflecting the centrality of their relationship to the epicenter of value in the class lifestyle. (Again, this study is organized to argue theoretical points so the following substantive discussion reports preliminary findings in need of more thorough investigation.)

National/Local Boundary. Middle-class informants—most of whom are now professionals who have been geographically mobile in their careers and have traveled widely in their leisure—understand their consumption patterns in relation to those typical of professionals who are part of a national labor market and, thus, a national consumption community (DiMaggio 1987). Because most of their peers live in large urban, suburban, and exurban areas, they routinely use their previous or imagined future participation in the consumption patterns typical of large cities as a reference point to frame their current patterns.

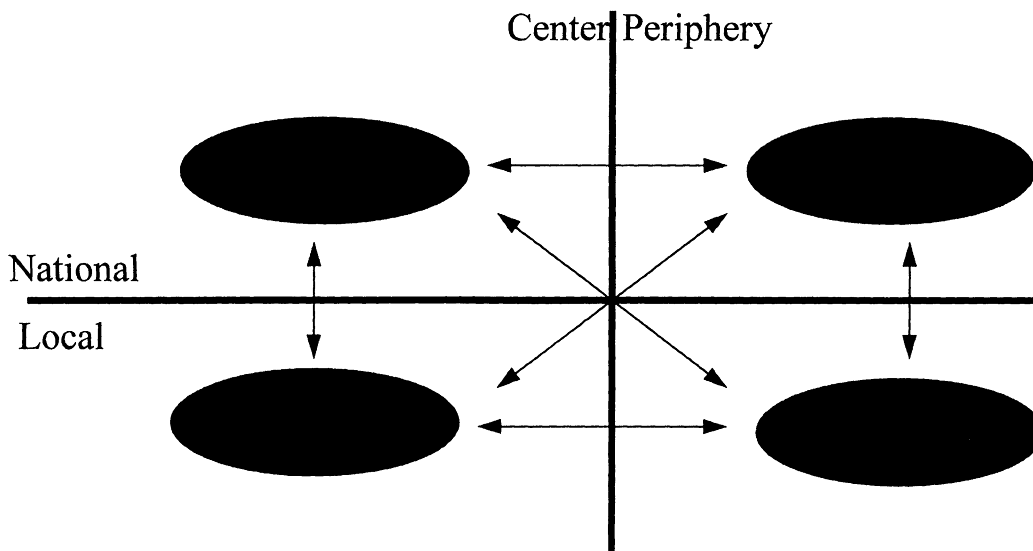
Because middle-class tastes require maintaining leisure networks on a national and even international basis, a common issue is how to maintain these relationships while living in a small, isolated community. For example, Janet regularly invites out-of-town friends from Washington, Philadelphia, and New York to stay out in the country, and these friends reciprocate by putting her up in the city in order to get needed exposure to city life. Matthew spends several months of the year visiting friends in Europe and the western United States. Jessica chose weaving as an avocation because it does not require her to become too invested in the local community: it had to "be moveable, to be portable, because I knew that it was likely that we'd be moving around a lot. And I needed something that I could take with me, that I wouldn't feel resentful because I had to pick up and leave something there I had invested time and energy in."

In contrast, working-class tastes are constructed through long-term enculturation in central Pennsylvania and relatively little interaction beyond this area. These informants seldom travel out of state, and many have lived in Centre or a nearby county all of their lives, so they consistently view the county as a good place to live or simply "where I've always lived" without giving alternatives much consideration, even when queried directly on this point. Their comfort with activities that predominate locally—playing cards, camping, socializing at lodges (e.g., Elks, Moose, and VFW), hunting, folk dancing, local pageants, and gardening—leads to characterizations of urban consumption as unknown and uninterpretable. Instead, city life is condensed into a handful of key adjectives: dangerous, (too) fast paced, and unfriendly.

Center/Periphery Boundary. A second boundary further organizing lifestyles is based on socioeconomic position in the class. The lifestyle of the dominant fraction reflects their integral relationship to the socioeconomic conditions of the class (Center), while the dominated fraction evinces a lifestyle in opposition to, and so necessarily at the margins of, the class epicenter (Periphery). For the working class, the Town Status lifestyle is organized around the hub of the local economy, in this case, the university, while the Rural Folkways lifestyle is structured around those local activities associated with tradition rather then local economic power. For the middle class, the dominant Cosmopolitan lifestyle is organized around tastes for cultural diversity (hence the oft-noted

FIGURE 1

TWO SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES CONSTRUCT FOUR RURAL AMERICAN CLASS LIFESTYLES



''omnivore'' phenomenon; see, e.g., DiMaggio 1987; Peterson and Simkus 1992) that are central to the multicultural urban spaces and diverse social networks required in this class position, while the dominated Neotraditional lifestyle is structured by desires for a homogeneous cultural environment sheltered from the relativism, dynamism, and contingency characteristic of global cities (see Fig. 1).

Town Status. Within the local cultural framework of the working class, the dominance of the university in everyday life makes it the primary locus of social and moral value that organizes consumer life in the county. The university dominates life in the county: it is far and away the largest employer, students account for one-third of the county's population, the university arranges many of the leisure activities available in the county (sports, films, musical concerts, theater, lectures, fairs), and many others are oriented toward the student population (bars, restaurants, music). A few informants from working-class backgrounds, frequently the first in their families to attend college, who have been able to secure stable positions in the university economy with good benefits, thrive on the bounty of activities that the university offers—spectator sports, concerts, classes, the annual arts festival—and view the university as a source of pride and prestige structuring much of what they find desirable in their everyday lives.

> Karen and her husband met at Penn State as undergraduates, and both now work at the university. Penn State is not only a source of economic stability and community affiliation; further, it serves as the locus of the couple's moral order. The university is granted the highest value and, so, is central in structuring what they find desirable in their discretionary consumer lives. For example, both are die-hard fans of Penn State football. When their first child was born, on the way home from the hospital, the husband insisted on driving to Joe Paterno's (the Penn State football coach) driveway to take a picture of the newborn in front of his house. Paterno's accidental appearance at their wedding (held on campus) is one of their favorite stories. Every autumn weekend is organized around Penn State football games. Friends come from out of town; they party in town the night before the game, tailgate for hours before the game, and after attending, come home and watch the video of the game that they have recorded while away. When discussing their house, Karen describes it as satisfactory but says that both want to move closer to the campus, which is viewed as a highly desirable neighborhood, especially compared with the nearby town where the husband grew up (which they consider blue collar in comparison with the university).

For these informants, the university's consumer resources are prestigious assets, integration with which distinguishes one from other local residents who are associated with the depressed industry and laggard way of life of the area beyond the university's influence.

Rural Folkways. Most informants with working-class backgrounds now hold service jobs such as retail managers, teaching assistants, and university secretaries (rather than the iron-belt jobs of their fathers) that cater to the infrastructural demands of the university's middle-class and student populations. These informants focus on interaction with family and friends who have historical ties to the county (as opposed to the transient university people) and engage in activities that have been popular in the area long before the university came to dominate the county economically and demographically—hunting, fishing,

vegetable gardening, participating in social activities sponsored by local churches and schools, and attending fairs and shows that celebrate the historic agricultural and mining industries of the area. Some of these informants hold such animosity toward university people and university activities that they actually avoid driving into State College even though it is the largest town in the county and has many of the major retail stores. In this case, the Center-Periphery boundary is inscribed concretely in how different types of space are understood and used. Spaces with intensive university associations—the university grounds, football stadium, and favorite university hangouts—act like a magnet, providing an irresistible attraction for the Town Status lifestyle while repelling the Rural Traditions informants. This symbolic boundary is reinforced by Rural Traditions informants' characterizations of university people either through a distancing form of deference (''They're very nice, but . . . '') or as arrogant and unconcerned about the community, and by their criticisms of the university for negatively impacting their preferred way of life by inflating housing costs and spurring development across the countryside.[3]

Cosmopolitans. The upper tier of the middle class—the highly educated, urbane New Class (in a university town, these tend to be professors, administrators, and some doctors) tend to be Cosmopolitans. Cosmopolitans, although they enjoy the natural beauty and ease of living in State College, emphasize that the area significantly lacks variety and sophistication in consumer goods, social activities, and people. The activities in Centre County can never compare with the diverse range that one can take advantage of in larger cities. And so these informants make considerable efforts to maintain an urban, national lifestyle through frequent travel, involvement with organizations that are national in scope, and maintenance of expansive friendship networks that span nationally and even internationally. In the course of talking about life in Centre County, these informants interjected that there are many consumer goods and activities—professional sporting events, live music, interesting restaurants, designer clothes, ethnic foods, and cultural activities such as museums and plays—that simply are not available locally. In searching for things to do, several people describe participating in activities such as gardening and college spectator sports that would not be of interest if they lived in a locale that offered more suitable resources. Similarly, several informants mentioned the hardship that they face because certain ''essential'' foodstuffs and apparel are not available locally. Consider this description of a nutritionist who frequently compared State College with Reno, Nevada, where she previously lived.

> In Reno, Lenore and her husband participated regularly in outdoor activities such as skiing, sailing, and hiking with friends and often spent weekends viewing foreign films. Lenore now fills much of her leisure time in State College swapping books in a reading club, quilting, and watching soap operas. In search of leisure outlets, she sought out a clearinghouse for many interest-based clubs primarily for faculty wives. She signed up for four groups, mainly because ''they're inexpensive and you can meet people'' rather than because of any intrinsic interest in the offerings. She complains of the conservative feel of State College (''All the people are the same. . . . Nobody's doing anything weird'') and the fact that many goods that they desire are not easily available: ''When we moved here, there wasn't even a Penny's! And not that Penny's is culture, but I mean . . . it was hard to find specific things when you were going shopping.''

Another informant, who moved back to Centre County because she divorced and needed her family's support in raising her child feels so conflicted about living in State College that she participates only grudgingly and openly expresses her hostility toward typical State College consumption activities.

> Betsy acknowledges that ''most people know I'm not happy living in this area at all'' but feels that ''you get sucked into'' the security of a Penn State job with good benefits. She much prefers big city life, ''which is one of the reasons I don't like it here. Because I'm single. This is not a good place to be when you're single. . . . Everybody knows exactly what this town is good for. . . It's great when you're college age but after age 25. . . . My life is so boring around here. . . . I take classes just because I get so bored sometimes, there's nothing to do. . . . I feel like I'm brain-dead, like there's no intellectual stimulus. People just don't have a life here. If you stay long enough you'll see. . . . It's awful here. I'm pretty well conditioned back into it now but it took a couple of years.'' Now, she fills up her time ''watching an awful lot of television'' and writing stories and participates in local events such as football games and the Festival of the Arts held outdoors in the summer, which she views as ''the best of a bad situation.'' She tries to get out of town to visit friends in nearby cities whenever possible.

Because of the lack of opportunities to enact tastes, Cosmopolitan informants express their tastes not only by enacting them elsewhere as much as possible but also through the derogatory manner in which they consume local offerings—interpreting the local consumption offerings as mediocre and limited in diversity and participating in the locally available activities only grudgingly, often in a mocking rather than earnest manner. By interpreting the consumption resources found in State College as lack-

[3]University secretaries provide interesting data for explicating this boundary since they are forced to negotiate between both sides: their class habitus often emphasizes rural traditions, yet in their job they constantly interact with ''university people.'' Secretaries negotiate this boundary spanning position in different ways: some maintain superficial work relations with the university middle class and devote their consumer energies to rural traditions, while for others their university interactions makes the boundary less salient, so they place value in university-associated consumption activities (very much like the Town Status lifestyle) while maintaining the Rural Traditions lifestyle. For such boundary-spanning groups, it would be useful to examine whether they maintain relatively independent social networks in these spheres or whether they have formed a ''metalifestyle'' cluster with other boundary spanners.

luster, parochial, and mundane and interacting with these resources based on this cultural framework, these informants distinguish themselves from others who find the same activities to be stimulating and diverse. Thus, these persons express Cosmopolitan tastes even when they are not participating in the activities that they deem essential for that lifestyle.

Neotraditionalists. Other middle-class informants who do not or no longer participate in the top tier of the middle-class labor market acknowledge that urban life has certain cultural advantages but emphasize the disadvantages such as crime, commuting time, pollution, public schools, and unfriendly people. For these neotraditionalist informants, State College is idyllic because it allows for a safer, simpler, more peaceable life than the city. Centre Country is a tranquil setting for raising children because of low crime, good schools, a social infrastructure that revolves around family activities and for pursuing a peaceful way of life in a scenic area with the added benefit of the social and cultural activities provided by a large university. Like the Town Status lifestyle, they too make heavy use of the university-based consumption resources, but they consume these resources in a different manner to draw a different symbolic boundary. Rather than a local source of prestige (compared with the laggards of the working class), these resources supply them with ''the best of both worlds'' (compared with the hassled lives of the Cosmopolitans)—the cultural stimulation of urban life without the accompanying social problems.

This mapping of class lifestyles differs significantly from classic ethnographic descriptions (e.g., Lynd and Lynd 1956; Warner 1960) that describe lifestyle as organized around status hierarchies in the locality. In the contemporary era of advanced global capitalism, the dominant fraction of the middle class live in a social world that assigns negligible value to localities other than important global cities. So, whereas becoming a pillar of the local community was once the pinnacle of status achievement, this position has now become devalued as the middle class has become vested in national consumption patterns, leaving local status to the successful working class and the dominated middle class. The working and middle classes now use highly spatialized symbolic boundaries to construct themselves in relation to a relatively unknown other: for the working class the middle class has big city tastes and ephemeral ties to the local community, while for the middle class the working class are parochial relics.

Consumption patterns are not equivalent to lifestyles; rather, they are the resources from which lifestyles are constructed. In the poststructuralist approach, consumption patterns are socially meaningful—that is, are lifestyles—to the extent that they exist in opposition to comparable alternatives. In other words, lifestyles exist as symbolic boundaries that create what is distinctive about a particular consumption pattern by placing this pattern in relation to other significant alternatives. Neither the object signification nor personality/values approach allows for the identification of symbolic boundaries because both treat lifestyles as shared subjective rather than social phenomena. Because of this assumption, they analyze consumption patterns in isolation rather than focus on the relationships between consumption patterns.

This perspective implies that a given consumption pattern can serve as the basis for different lifestyles when enacted in different social contexts. For example, the ''cosmopolitanness'' of Cosmopolitan tastes will likely be less pronounced for those who live in urban areas where they can satisfactorily express their tastes in everyday consumption practices surrounded by others who do similarly and away from those who have more narrow tastes (i.e., the symbolic boundary is much less salient). Instead, in the company of other Cosmopolitans, finer gradations of these cosmopolitan tastes are likely to become the basis of symbolic boundaries. Rather than Cosmopolitan, one is cosmopolitan in a particular manner: the business professional who eats at ethnic restaurants and attends art openings, the African-American who is a connoisseur of both European and African cultural forms, the cultural producer for whom cosmopolitanism is expressed through exploring and knowing something about the more exotic peripheral terrains outside the city, perhaps even State College!

It is important to note that these relational differences are seldom part of peoples' reflexive understanding of their consumption practices. Rather, this knowledge is of the type that Giddens (1984) terms ''practical knowledge.'' Like language and other forms of presuppositional knowledge, we have the practical mastery necessary to engage skillfully in consumption practices and evaluate others' tastes as similar or different, but we are usually unable to describe the abstract principles that serve as the basis for these judgments and actions because this type of discursive knowledge is rarely necessary for practical action (Bourdieu 1984). Recognition of this distinction has important methodological implications: asking people directly about the social meanings of their consumption practices is unlikely to yield appropriate data. Instead, researchers must interpret these relational differences from grounded discussions of tastes, preferences, and actions at a level that is relevant to everyday life (see Thompson et al. 1994) or else from in situ field observation of these consumption practices (Holt 1995a). People are usually able to articulate the specific activities that they enjoy and, so, bring them emotionally close to others and those activities that they find intimidating, boring, vulgar, or strange and, so, tend to alienate or distinguish them from others (Lamont 1992). The investigator, then, must abstract from these grounded discussions of consumption practices to determine their collective meanings and, thus, their social classificatory consequences.

Conceptualizing lifestyles as properties of symbolic boundaries not only enhances descriptive power versus current approaches; it also helps to focus research on sociological questions that have until recently been ignored in consumer research. While consumer research

studies of lifestyle have focused on the consumption pattern as the endpoint of analysis (i.e., the dependent variable), sociologists of consumption are interested primarily in the social consequences of consumption patterns. Symbolic boundaries are, by definition, socially consequential because they include and exclude, bringing people together as friends, colleagues, and lovers while denying these possibilities to others.

Lifestyles Are Collective Phenomena

Although personality/values lifestyle analysis aggregates consumers into groups, it treats consumption patterns as a structural property of the individual—people are assumed to have a dominant trait or value system that systematically structures consumer behaviors so that each person can be represented by a single coherent trait or value system that structures his or her consumption. This type of analysis leads to orthogonal classificatory systems. For example, categorization schemes such as VALS, LOV, and Rokeach assign individuals into mutually exclusive clusters on the basis of a single construct (e.g., the Achiever disposition in VALS) or pattern of constructs (e.g., the value systems described by Kamakura and Mazzon [1991]). This orthogonality assumption is characteristic of phenomenological analyses as well (e.g., Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson et al. 1994).

In contrast, poststructuralist lifestyle analysis treats consumption patterns as expressions of collectivities. Since in highly differentiated advanced capitalist societies individual actions are typically structured by numerous social categories at different levels of aggregation, they are best conceptualized, sociologically, as a confluence of interpenetrating collectivities (Hall 1992). For example, claiming that a college student has a Generation X lifestyle distinguishes this person on the basis of consumption patterns expressive of collectivities of both age and generation. But surely this person's consumption is also impacted by other collectivities (e.g., gender, nationality, ethnicity, and class). The tastes that represent each of these collectivities interpenetrate an individual's consumption practices in a complex manner that is difficult to untangle without a sophisticated sociocultural lens to guide interpretation. These interactions may be synergistic (as is the case with Dorene, whose antiques consumption can be read as the intersection of nouveaux riche and rural American collectivities), or may be conflictual (as is the case for Sarah, who shares middle-class interests in edifying cultural events that she is usually unable to pursue because, on the basis of her traditional gendered framework, she is committed to continuous involvement in her children's lives).

The 23 interviews were examined to determine if a single classificatory system could satisfactorily describe shared consumption patterns. Creating orthogonal categories required intensive data reduction in which much descriptive detail of informants' consumption patterns had to be discarded. In contrast, by clustering the informants according to a variety of social classification schemes, each of which leads to a different clustering of informants, much more of the detail of the consumption patterns could be captured in the analysis. The multidimensional quality of informant consumption patterns can be illustrated by considering the only informant who comes close to approximating the unidimensionality assumption undergirding the personality/values approach.

Ralph (a retired professor) is an extremely driven, goal-oriented person who has achieved much of what he dreamed as a young man. He is very conscious and proud of his upbringing as the son of a poor midwestern farmer and his German Baptist heritage that, in his self-exegesis, led him to pursue a very conservative, frugal, work-focused life. He is immensely proud of his academic accomplishments and frequently exhibits a sense of superiority derived from his success and his German heritage. These qualities—frugality, work ethic, elitism—run through his discussions of all of the consumption categories. He continues to be actively involved in his academic field, attending conferences and talking to old students on the phone. He advocates reading as the focal intellectual pursuit, and his favorite books are of German history. He is a meticulous gardener who prides himself on the quality of fruits he produces. He views classical music as a morally uplifting aesthetic experience and is partial to Wagner. He is especially proud of his valuable collection of Indian bells, which he purchased inexpensively while on sabbatical in India.

Compared with those of the other informants, Ralph's description of his tastes are unusually coherent both because of his father's early and continuous inculcation of a set of philosophical principles and because he deploys a linear narrative to construct a coherent story of his life. Tellingly, Ralph describes how his father worked every day and also required this of his children, so Ralph remembers only one occasion in his entire childhood when he did something leisurely with his father. At an individual level of analysis, Ralph's consumption practices are reasonably characterized by his Protestant, Germanic, Horatio Alger values. Nonetheless, analyzing Ralph's tastes and consumption practices in terms of important social categories provides additional insight into the patterning of his consumption. These insights are necessarily obscured by a theoretical framework that seeks to distill a single pattern from a wide variety of consumption practices. Comparing Ralph with other informants revealed that his tastes are characteristic of men rather than women (e.g., oriented toward career rather than family), of the elderly as opposed to the young (e.g., actively defending the modernist canon in the face of contemporary multiculturalism), and of professionals rather than the working class (e.g., valuing the aesthetic aspects of consumption objects). Analyzing Ralph's consumption as a confluence of these structuring frameworks provides a more sensitive description than trying to describe his consumption as a single coherent pattern.

In poststructuralist lifestyle analysis, lifestyles are con-

strued as properties of collectivities, not individuals. The number and content and dynamics of lifestyles are related (though not in a simple mechanistic manner) to the number, content, and dynamics of collectivities in society. These collectivities exist not only within nations but also, increasingly, as transnational, diasporic groupings. In advanced capitalist societies, social conditions have become increasingly fragmented because of labor specialization, the increased movement of people and capital, and the proliferation of information and material culture. Since collective affiliations are multiple, fragmented, of varying intensities, and often conflicted, so too must be our consumption patterns. Unless a particular collectivity is highly stigmatized and politicized (as are many gay, lesbian, and ethnic collectivities in the fractious battle between Eurocentric ideals and multiculturalism and certain subcultures, as well as many religious collectivities that are labeled as deviant), individuals are unlikely to understand and enact consumption practices centered around a single coherent framework of tastes expressive of a particular social identity. Rather, typically, individual tastes are a messy and fuzzy amalgam of numerous interpenetrating implicit cultural frameworks that are necessarily creatively and variously interpreted by people as they manage particular life circumstances.

Given this complex interpenetration of structures shaping consumption patterns, mapping the relationship between important collectivities and consumption practices provides a more detailed and comprehensive description of consumption patterns than does a single orthogonal categorization scheme (e.g., Durgee, Holbrook, and Wallendorf 1991; Hirschman 1988; Venketesh 1980). Studying gendered, ethnic, or generational consumption patterns is likely to lead to more nuanced description than is studying the lifestyle of Dorene, Harry, or Jessica. To further complicate analysis, one could follow recent sociological, anthropological, and cultural studies investigations that examine the intersection of different collectivities since there are important interactions between collectivities that go unnoticed when research is confined to a single social category (e.g., hooks 1994). Operationally, collective consumption patterns exist as tendencies for members of a collectivity to enact similar consumption practices. Although these tendencies may not always be judged significant in an absolute sense (e.g., as a percentage of variance explained), they are sociologically significant if they act as symbolic boundaries, reproducing or transforming collective identities.

Lifestyles Are Dynamic Sociohistorical Constructions

Poststructuralists argue that patterns of actions such as lifestyles are social constructions: lifestyles are always idiographic phenomena structured by the particular configuration of collectivities in a given sociohistorical setting. (Bourdieu is an important exception to this characterization, as he remains something of a structuralist on this issue; see Calhoun 1993.) A comprehensive lifestyle description, then, also includes a diachronic analysis describing how constellations of lifestyles evolve over time and their relationship to changes in social and other cultural structures. For example, understandings of masculinity and femininity have changed dramatically in the United States over the past 30 years as a much higher percentage of women have entered the paid labor market, as the nuclear family has become a minority choice, and as political battles have been fought over women's economic and reproductive rights and representations of women in the mass media (see Thompson and Haytko 1997). As understandings of men and women have changed, so too have the lifestyles that express these understandings in the realm of consumption: gender boundaries for clothing were subverted in the 1970s (remember Diane Keaton?), now androgyny is often haute couture (Davis 1992), and ironic statements about traditional femininity mark the avant-garde (witness the rise of baby-doll dresses in youth culture today). Since the collectivities that constitute social categories are constantly evolving, so too must be our lifestyles. This structural dynamism leads to both active and passive changes in lifestyle: (1) people experiment with and adopt new lifestyle possibilities (Mick and Buhl 1992; Penaloza 1994; Zablocki and Cantor 1976), and (2) as the universe of lifestyles evolves to reflect social changes, lifestyle meanings can change even when consumption patterns remain unchanged (Gusfield 1992; Hebdige 1979).

In the personality/values approach, lifestyles are assumed to be structured by universal traits or values, so empirical studies treat lifestyles as invariant, ahistorical constructs. Lifestyle changes over time are usually discussed in terms of shifts in the percentage of the population that fits into each invariant lifestyle category (Mitchell 1983). When changes are so dramatic that typologies become outdated, researchers construct new typologies with new measures (e.g., VALS 2). Because the personality/values approach does not offer a theoretical linkage between people's lifestyles and the social, cultural, economic, political, and technological environments in which they live, it does not provide a means to conceptualize how lifestyles vary over time or across different societies. Some advocates of object signification analysis, grounded in synchronic Levi-Straussian structuralist analysis, also imply that object meanings are invariant and ahistorical (e.g., Levy 1981), while others call for a more dynamic view of object meanings (McCracken 1986; Richins 1994). The perspective developed here complements the latter view but focuses on the dynamics of lifestyles and their constitutive consumption practices rather than object meanings.

In the interviews, chronological discussions of tastes revealed changes in lifestyle both through lifestyle experimentation and through the passive redefinition that occurs as the universe of lifestyle possibilities changes. Two of the informants (Melissa and Tony) describe their journeys from a self-directed, hedonically charged lifestyle a de-

cade ago to a more "mature" lifestyle focusing on family and community. As participants in the go-go 1980s, the informants described themselves as "getting caught up" in what, according to the mass media at least, was a preferred class lifestyle—the yuppie lifestyle emphasizing the hedonistic indulgence and conspicuous extravagance of elegant dining, exotic vacations, and designer clothes. Even though they now view these consumption practices negatively, they do not offer a negative self-attribution since, at the time, this seemed like the only thing to do. In other words, the universe of lifestyle possibilities was structured such that career successes of professionals were often perceived in terms of the material rewards these careers provided—a relationship likely inspired by the social and political climate of the time. Eventually, both became deeply dissatisfied with this free-spending, "live for today" lifestyle and began a search for alternatives (Melissa: "We were cruising and riding a wave and just, jet-setting, you know? And from then, like, we crashed, okay?"). Tony now focuses intensively on his growing local business but is also trying to "give back to the community" through a variety of volunteer activities. Melissa returned to her Christian upbringing and has reconstructed her life as one that is completely focused on her family. The evolution of both Melissa's and Tony's lifestyles was facilitated by changes in the valuation of lifestyle alternatives for economically secure baby boomers. Likely because of broad societal changes (economic dislocations, deteriorating environment, exacerbating social problems, the anomie experienced by a highly mobile labor force), communitarian values have recently influenced what are deemed to be desirable lifestyles for economically successful baby boomers. Melissa and Tony exemplify people whose tastes have changed as they have experimented with these new lifestyle possibilities. To describe satisfactorily these shifts in lifestyle, we need to describe how the universe of lifestyle possibilities changes qualitatively over time rather than rely on an invariant set of categories.

Alternatively, for some informants, consumption patterns have remained relatively constant over the years, but their lifestyles have changed because the universe of lifestyle alternatives that relationally define these patterns has evolved. This is particularly the case for some of the older people interviewed whose previously mainstream tastes have become marginalized as the baby boomers supplanted their generation and defined normative tastes in American society.

> Well into her retirement, Heloise is a self-defined depression-era frugal housewife. Reflecting back on her life as a married woman and mother in the 1930s-60s, she describes herself as living in a manner very typical of the times. Now, however, while her preferences have changed only marginally (not as much social activity, slower pace), others' tastes that she experiences both interpersonally and through mass media have changed dramatically. Thus, the meanings of her tastes in comparison with those of other groups (i.e., her lifestyle) have also radically shifted. Things that were once taken for granted she now deems old-fashioned: her preference for lyrically oriented music in comparison with current preferences for rock and rap, her insistence on having a "hot meal" every night for dinner and dressing up for church on Sunday, her aversion to fast food, and her disgust with the off-color humor on sitcoms, the "tasteless" violence on real-life dramas, and movies that have graphic sex and language that is "offensive" and "embarrassing." She talks of her interests in bridge and needlework as dying traditions that mostly older people do. She has come to understand her consumption as that of an older generation. This lifestyle has emerged relationally: as the world around them has evolved, she and her husband look on interestedly (he tunes into MTV on occasion to "see what the kids are up to") but increasingly from a distance. That her lifestyle has become a decided departure from the norm also has positive features. She relishes the distinctiveness of her evolving lifestyle in comparison with the relatively homogeneous post–World War II middle-class lifestyle of her younger years. To wit, she recently remodeled her kitchen by herself in 1950s style with black-and-white checkered flooring, wall covering, and cabinetry, and she repainted her old almond-colored refrigerator in hot pink enamel, as if to say to the world "I love the Fifties and I'm proud of it!"

Heloise's lifestyle is expressive of her generation and age not because her consumption patterns have changed substantially but because her once mainstream practices have been supplanted by substantially different ones. Since the world around her has changed, the meanings of her preferences (e.g., for hot, home-made evening meals) have also. The tastes that once defined Heloise as part of the white adult middle class now serve to define her as an older person from the golden era, a bearer of fading traditions.

The master social categories such as nation, class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual preference, generation, religion, life stage, and occupation are of central importance in the organization of all industrialized societies. However, as social constructionist research has repeatedly demonstrated, different social contexts and different historical periods produce specific sociocultural configurations of these categories. These classificatory regimes not only structure cultural understandings but also pervade social institutions and social relations (see Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Collectivities, then, are the groupings that map important alternative positions in each of these social categories that together constitute the classificatory system operative in a particular place and time. In the field of consumption, these positional differences in a social category are marked through lifestyles. Lifestyles can change over time and across societies because of social, political, cultural, economic, and technological changes that are explored and reflected through consumption practices. People often experiment with new lifestyles as they emerge, but, even if they do not, existing lifestyles are constantly evolving because their meanings are constructed by relational differences with an ever-changing set of alternatives.

DISCUSSION

Poststructuralist Lifestyle Analysis: A Synopsis

The sociology of consumption is animated by research investigating how collectivities that demarcate classes, generations, genders, ethnicities, and other social categories are expressed, reproduced, and potentially transformed through consumption. Notwithstanding many productive applications in both sociology and marketing, the predominant theoretical frameworks used to analyze these questions have become less useful in recent years. In contrast to both postmodern theorists and marketing researchers who argue that this decline indicates that social categories no longer significantly structure consumption, I pursue an alternative position. Structured by historical changes in the symbolic-expressive characteristics of consumption, the social patterning of consumption has become increasingly subtle and complexly intertwined. These new historical conditions require a more sensitive approach to describe consumption patterns. In this study, I develop a poststructuralist mode of lifestyle analysis that allows for analysis of more nuanced, subtle distinctions in social consumption patterns than is possible with either the personality/values or object signification approaches.

Since, in consumer research, lifestyle is usually studied from a psychological perspective, it is worth reviewing some of the general axioms of the sociocultural foundation on which the poststructuralist approach rests. Consumption can be conceived as a field of social life that is organized by the expression of tastes. As such, consumption is distinctive from other fields that are organized around different pursuits such as scarce productive resources (business), power (politics), metaphysical certitude (religion), and formal knowledge (education). All of these fields serve as domains in which the social organization of society is played out and, hence, reproduced. Thus, the key collectivities that together constitute the social relations of a society (e.g., those formed around master social categories such as class, gender, race/ethnicity) are typically represented in each of these fields, including consumption. Consumption is socially patterned because people who share similar social conditions acquire similar tastes that organize their consumer actions.

Personality/values lifestyle analysis is grounded in a linear model that begins with properties of mind and ends with patterns of behavior. Object signification analysis emphasizes the relationships between groups and objects without explicitly considering antecedents and consequences. In contrast, poststructuralist lifestyle analysis presumes that social and cultural structures are mutually and simultaneously constitutive. Cultural frameworks of tastes are not simply causal antecedents of consumption practices. Rather, patterns of understanding are reproduced only if they are inscribed in everyday actions, and actions remain patterned only to the extent that we retain the same understandings of what they mean (Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992).

Lifestyles are symbolic expressions of collectivities that, through relational differences with other collectivities, map the cultural content of important social categories in a particular social context: the particular masculine and feminine qualities that constitute gender, the characteristics of youthfulness as opposed to physical maturity that delineate age, the styles expressive of the upper middle class as opposed to the middle or working classes. Since consuming is a social activity in which consumption objects are used as resources to interact with others, tastes structure not only one's own consumption practices but also whom one is attracted to and admires, whom one finds uninteresting or does not understand, and whom one finds unappealing and so seeks to avoid. Thus, when people enact their tastes through particular consumption practices, they are enacting symbolic boundaries that affirm distinctions between collectivities. Lifestyles not only express collectivities, then; they also serve to reproduce these relationships. Lifestyles lead to associating with similarly socialized people and distancing from people from different backgrounds, and this process of interactional elective affinity reproduces the social conditions on which collectivities are based.

This view presents the social reproduction argument in its strongest form (often associated with Bourdieu) insofar as it emphasizes the determinative power of the enactment of tastes in everyday life to reproduce social relations. However, other contemporary social theorists argue for a more pliable, dynamic version of this model (Certeau 1984; Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). Social conditions are not mechanically reproduced by lifestyles for a variety of reasons. First, people have agency in their consumption: that is, because they must creatively interpret and apply their tastes to different situations, consumers can potentially alter their lifestyles and thereby sometimes also transform broader social relations (Sewell 1992). For example, changes in American women's tastes in clothing in the 1970s not only served to express changing social relations between the sexes but also helped to foster the evolution of men's and women's understandings of masculinity and femininity in American society. Second, since cultural frameworks of tastes are multiple and interpenetrating and collectivities exist at many levels of aggregation, lifestyles are inherently unstable (Hall 1992). For example, an older American man attending a professional baseball game may enact shared understandings that are simultaneously expressive of collectivities based on generation, gender, and nation, which, in turn are articulated in less macroscopic collectivities such as those of baseball fan and supporter of the local team. The individual experiences different lifestyles, then, not as discernible, clear-cut ways of life but as a complex, fuzzy, often conflicted set of tastes that must be continuously reinterpreted, negotiated, and synthesized. Third, although other dimensions of social life such as the political, economic, technical, and religious spheres are distinct from con-

sumption, they are not autonomous and, so, often interact with consumption patterns. For example, the emergence of the yuppie lifestyle among upper-middle-class professionals in the United States in the 1980s is often linked to economic and political shifts that significantly raised the real incomes of this group relative to others (Belk 1986). Thus, given the interplay of multiple interpenetrating cultural frameworks and the contingencies of their application, lifestyles are expressed as tendencies in how one consumes across multiple categories through time. Individuals are creative and industrious enough to individualize their consumption and even construct innovative ways of consuming, but, when they do so, they are always working with the existing frameworks of tastes in which they have been socialized.

Because the expression of a collectivity through lifestyle serves to either reproduce or transform the collectivity, lifestyles have important positive and negative social consequences that deserve the attention of consumer research. As Durkheimian scholars have long noted, shared consumption practices are critical for the formation and sustenance of communities such as the modern nation-state (e.g., Anderson [1983] 1990 describes how reading nationally distributed newspapers facilitated the formation of modern nation-states as "imagined communities"). On the other hand, lifestyles can also serve as potent exclusionary devices, limiting the social mobility of less endowed groups. Evaluated on the basis of the privileged tastes naturalized in elite groups, tastes of the less privileged are often evaluated as alien and vulgar, which leads to systematic social (and, hence, economic and political) exclusion.

Using Poststructuralist Lifestyle Analysis

My hope is that the poststructuralist approach will contribute to the revitalization of lifestyle research as a core research domain of the discipline. To conclude, I draw on recent empirical studies of social consumption patterns to develop workbench implications of the five principles of the poststructuralist approach.

Contextual Cultural Frameworks. If consumption patterns are organized by cultural frameworks constituted by (and constitutive of) particular social contexts, then it is futile to try to describe these patterns with nomothetic traits or values, as do classification schemes such as VALS, Rokeach, and LOV. Regardless of their methodological advantages, nomothetic schemes such as these will always result in superficial descriptions of consumption patterns because, by necessity, they abstract away a high percentage of cultural content. In the search for robust constructs, these schemes often elide those very qualities that make consumption patterns distinctive. Instead, despite many methodological inconveniences, fully realized descriptions of lifestyles require idiographic analysis of the cultural frameworks of tastes that orient how people consume in a particular sociohistorical context.

For example, compare Craig Thompson's (1996) study of the juggling lifestyle of baby boom–generation middle-class professional women to the VALS categories listed above. Thompson situates his analysis in the local contexts that have given meaning to these women's lives—for example, their upbringing during a period of American history in which traditional ideals of femininity and motherhood moved from idealized goals to contested norms and in which American marketers helped to create new standards of feminine value based on domestic duties such as cleaning and cooking. By so doing, he is able to document a series of tensions—between holding it together and falling apart, between envisioned ideals and practical concessions—that are central and distinctive characteristics of the juggling lifestyle. Because VALS was constructed to apply to a broad and timeless swath of consumers, its nine categories abstract away and so are blind to these critical gendered lifestyle meanings.

Methodologically, poststructuralist lifestyle analysis requires limiting substantially the social, spatial, and historical scope of the study to allow the researcher to capture the contextual elements of lifestyle meaning. In practice, it is not possible to have explicit rules for selecting the bounds of an appropriate context, so the selection of an appropriate domain for idiographic analysis is usually accomplished through analytic assumptions drawn from prior research that suggest which contextual differences have the most impact (e.g., what historical periods, what social categories, what spaces).

Consumption Practices. One likely reason why the container metaphor is so widely accepted in the sociology of consumption is that it simplifies measurement enormously. Researchers are allowed to ignore the messy contextual details of consumer life; instead, they assume that data measuring object and activity preferences reveal all that is important to know about our lives as consumers. This study demonstrates that the container model presents an overly deterministic depiction of how consumption objects express lifestyles. Since consumption objects are polysemic, they are more aptly considered resources that facilitate and constrain consumers' meaning construction rather than fully realized meanings that consumers acquire. Consumption objects offer enough semiotic degrees of freedom so that different collectivities can find the same object meaningful in different ways. Particular meanings become articulated only as people apply cultural frameworks of taste to make sense of, evaluate, and use these objects. Certainly, some meanings are easier for consumers to produce than others because their associations are more firmly institutionalized (i.e., there are "preferred meanings" [Hall et al. 1980]). For example, it is probably easier to incorporate a Chippendale dresser into a WASP lifestyle than into the lifestyle of a left-leaning avant-garde artist. However, that the latter meanings are easily accomplished—for example, through ironic appropriation of bourgeois artifacts—argues that goods orient but do not constrain consumers' meaning construction.

Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) study of the "new riders" of Harley-Davidson motorcycles demonstrates the benefits of applying cultural methods to collect data about consumption practices. Using participant-observation, ethnographic interviews, and archival materials, they were able to capture in their data consumer practices that allow them to infer meanings of Harleys that would remain invisible to the survey instruments used in lifestyle research. For example, they recount vividly the weekend rides, dress, interactional styles, and annual rallies that bikers use to give meaning to their consumption. This detailed record of how "new riders" consume their bikes allows the researchers to excavate particular ideas of freedom, patriotism, and masculinity that are inscribed in the consumption of Harleys.

If lifestyles are composed of patterns of consumption practices, measures need to explicate how people understand, evaluate, appreciate, and use consumption objects rather than just patterns of object ownership and activity participation. This measurement goal does not preclude the use of surveys (see Bourdieu [1984] and Peterson and Simkus [1992] for innovative uses of survey data to draw inferences about practices), but it does limit significantly the potential of this data-gathering technique (see Holt, forthcoming). Poststructuralist research typically makes use of detailed grounded cultural data—interviews, observations, focus groups, media and literary representations, and archival materials—that illuminate the everyday practices of the population of interest.

Lifestyles as Symbolic Boundaries. Because lifestyles are constructed by symbolic boundaries between collectivities that are expressed through distinctive consumption patterns, lifestyle analysis requires mapping these relationships. For example, it is impossible to understand the lifestyles of middle-class American youth in the twentieth century without describing how they have appropriated African-American cultural forms to construct a more exciting and existentially pure lifestyle in relation to adult middle-class tastes (Hannerz 1993). Rap music resonates with middle-class white youth precisely because its associations with African-American men from inner-city ghettos signifies virility, authenticity, and danger. These relational understandings allow them to construct an oppositional youth identity in relation to their parents interpretations of the same music as expressions of the most symbolically threatening and alienating "other" in American society (Binder 1993). Similarly, the many studies of youth subcultures by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham demonstrate why it is important to conceive of lifestyles in terms of symbolic boundaries. For example, in a famous case study, Dick Hebdige (1988) describes how the meanings of the Vespa motorscooter in Great Britain were constituted by its appropriation as a condensed symbol of masculinity: the Vespa came to represent one side of the binary distinguishing a particular effeminate version of masculinity (prototypically represented by the Mods) in relation to a more aggressive masculine variant (prototypically represented by the Rockers, who rode motorcycles).

Studies such as this one demonstrate persuasively that lifestyle analysis requires describing how symbolic boundaries between collectivities are expressed through consumption patterns. Relational differences in meanings can be described with either the grab bag of interpretive techniques developed in poststructuralist analysis (see, e.g., Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994) or quantitative techniques such as multidimensional scaling and correspondence analysis that are designed to tease out qualitative relationships between constructs. Also, synthetic approaches such as relation-based metaphor elicitation techniques (Zaltman and Schuck 1995) have much potential for mapping symbolic boundaries.

Lifestyle as a Collective Construct. Empirical studies that use lifestyle analysis to explain individual consumption patterns have had negligible success (even the most advanced statistical techniques result in R^2 statistics of 1–2 percent on the average). The poststructuralist approach suggests that these marginal results are not due to methodological inadequacies but, rather, follow from the principle that lifestyles are collective rather than individual phenomena. In this view, even though any given lifestyle will necessarily explain a relatively small percentage of an individual's consumption patterns, such collective analysis is necessary to plumb successfully nuanced differences in consumption patterns.

The importance of this principle can be demonstrated by analyzing further Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) findings. They advance the idea of subcultures of consumption—self-selected groups "based on a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand, or consumption activity" rather than groups that are defined according to social categories such as ethnicity, gender, social class, and age. This concept is motivated by the assumption that people will "simply not stay put in the boxes drawn up for them by sociologists, marketers, or demographers." Their approach is in many ways antithetical to the poststructuralist approach developed here, in particular because it suggests that lifestyles are shared individual rather than collective constructs.

From the ethnographic description, it appears that most of the "new riders" are conservative, middle-class, baby boom–generation men. Schouten and McAlexander show how the masculine design elements of Harley-Davidson motorcycles provide a cultural resource for the expression of certain ideas of masculinity held by this particular collective intersection. (In addition, it seems highly likely that these bikers are also imbibing in the physicality and bravado inscribed historically in Harleys through intertextual linkages to working-class rebellion in film and other mass-cultural texts) Thus, women who participate in the subculture must succumb to these patriarchal meanings (e.g., acting as objects adorning motorcycles) or else are treated as deviant. Further, we are told that the other

major Harley-based subculture of "outlaw bikers," who are described as working class and from an older generation, reject the new bikers as poseurs, some to the extent that they have even sold their Harleys and replaced them with dirt bikes. The authors also mention a variety of subgroups within the "new riders," including a group based on social class (the RUBs). An alternative interpretation of the authors' findings using a poststructuralist analysis is that they have described a culturally charged, polysemic object that attracts a variety of collectivities to inscribe particular collective meanings though differing consumption practices (while likely also sharing in common certain meanings that provides some sense of Durkheimian solidarity across collectivities).

Two assumptions appear to have led Schouten and McAlexander (1995) to claim that the consumption of Harley-Davidson motorcycles is unrelated to social collectivities. First, their concept of subcultures of consumption is, like the personality/values and object signification approaches, based on the container metaphor. Consumers are viewed as expressing a common identity to the extent that they share in the consumption of the same object. This assumption led the researchers to avoid problematizing differences in how the same object—Harley-Davidson motorcycles—are consumed across gender, generation, and class. Second, the authors believe that symbolic boundaries delineating collectivities are necessarily reflexively understood and, so, are explicitly expressed in a person's self-concept. Thus, self-identity as a biker is interpreted as evidence that collective identities are inoperative. But symbolic boundaries are typically embedded in natural and practical ways of acting in the world, so they are knowledgeably applied but seldom reflexively understood. The subcultures of consumption concept, then, collapses into a form of analytic individualism similar to neoclassical economics: in presupposing theoretically the "free choice" of subculture participants, it occludes the possibility of revealing collective consumption patterns that have important implications for social organization.

To plumb successfully the social patterning of consumption requires a shift in the unit of analysis from individual to collective consumption patterns. Since the early 1970s, lifestyle research has emphasized a psychographic rather than collective level of analysis because, it was argued, social categories had become less and less predictive of consumption patterns. The poststructuralist approach suggests that this shift was misguided. Just because simple one-to-one correspondences between social categories and objects no longer exist, it does not follow that social categories no longer structure consumption patterns. Analyzing consumption patterns on the basis of contextual cultural frameworks and consumption practices reveals the continuing importance of a collective level of analysis.

Lifestyle as Social Constructions. Conceiving of lifestyles as social constructions allows for a comprehensive explanation of lifestyle formation that is missing in personality/values and object signification research because these approaches assume that lifestyles are invariant concepts requiring only synchronic analysis. For example, consider the consumer research literature on ethnicity. The implicit theory relating ethnicity and consumption patterns in virtually all of these studies adopts the personality/values approach: ethnic group traits, which are held to greater or lesser extent depending on a person's self-identification with the ethnic group, leads (with some situational variance) to ethnic behaviors (explicitly stated in Stayman and Deshpande [1989]). From a poststructuralist perspective, conceiving of ethnicity as a cluster of primordial traits in which members participate to greater or lesser extent obscures the fact that ethnic identities are constructed in particular sociohistorical contexts in relation to other ethnic collectivities relevant to the group's life. Rather than an invariant trait, the definitional content of the ethnicity construct changes as these social relations shift (see Barth's [1969] influential conception of ethnicity as a shifting symbolic boundary). Just as important, the trait view of ethnicity also leads to theories that avoid examining what has become one of the most vital and influential research streams in the enormous consumer research literature outside of marketing: the role that dominant populations, and the consumption objects they produce, plays in the cultural structuring of ethnic and other dominated collectivities.

A social constructionist perspective is particularly important for explaining the extremely dynamic consumer cultures that diasporic ethnic populations are now developing through syncretic use of wide-ranging consumer resources (Lipsitz 1994). Consider, for example, how Miami's Latino culture has changed over the past 10 years from a bastion of anti-Castro conservatism to a thriving pan–Latin American consumption-saturated cultural center (Perez Firmat 1994). Similarly, Richard Wilk (1995) forwards a subtle processual explanation for how Belizeans have, through the dynamics of their consumption patterns while living away from their homeland, begun to construct ethnic and national identities from what was until recently a thoroughly creolized culture. A substantial ethnic community has emerged in Chicago where Belizeans reside temporarily for economic reasons, making frequent return trips to Belize. This nomadism has led to awareness by the transnational commuters of the distinctiveness of their lifestyles in relation to those of Americans; an interest in American lifestyles, particular interpretations and adaptations of which are speedily transported to Belize on return trips; and, at the same time, increased American interest in Belizean lifestyle, particularly as it relates to tourism; and so, a desire on the part of Belizeans to develop a distinctive lifestyle that can be commodified for Americans. Wilk shows, for example, how these transnational dynamics led to the development of a Belizean cuisine where none had existed only a decade prior.

Methodologically, to study lifestyles as social constructions requires applying at least one of the following research designs: longitudinal study of the process through which lifestyles change over time (e.g., Richard Wilk's [1995] study of Belizean lifestyle), historical studies that trace the cultural genealogy of particular lifestyles (e.g., Craig Thompson's [1996] description of the juggling lifestyle), or comparative studies that use contrasting cases to illuminate the particular social conditions constitutive of a particular lifestyle (e.g., Michele Lamont's [1992] comparison of the American and French upper-middle-class men).

APPENDIX

TABLE A1

INFORMANT DEMOGRAPHICS

	VALS category	Age	Sex/Number of children	Marital status	Income ($M)	Education	Occupation
Harry	Bel	79	M/4	Married	40–50(r)	Ph.D.	Professor
Nancy	Exp	31	F/1	Separated	20–25(1)	A.A.	Secretary
Matthew	Exp	79	M/1	Single	100+(r)	Ph.D.	Professor
Betsy	Exp	43	F/1	Divorced	20–25(1)	HS	Secretary
Ralph	Bel	90	M/3	Married	100+(r)	Ph.D.	Professor
Jessica	Bel	54	F/1	Married	85–100(1)	B.A.	Housewife
Ginger	Bel	74	F/1	Married	10–15(1)	HS	Housewife
Tony	Exp	40	M/0	Divorced	50–60(1)	College	Small business owner
Diane	Sus	28	F/2	Married	50–60(1)	HS	Housewife
Sarah	Bel	47	F/3	Divorced	25–30(1)	B.S.	Teacher
Sam	Bel	49	M/4	Married(2×)	60–70(2)	A.A.	Technician
Kristen	Bel	40	F/2	Married	60–70(2)	HS	Administrative assistant
Helen	Exp	37	F/2	Married	50–60(2)	HS	Teacher's assistant
Mary	Exp	41	F/1	Divorced	20–25(1)	College	Assistant store manager
Dorene	Bel	48	F/3	Married	70–85(1)	HS	Former pottery instructor
Lenore	Exp	41	F/1	Married	70–85(2)	B.S.	Dietician
Melissa	Bel	36	F/6	Married	40–50(1)	B.S.	Housewife
Karen	Exp	31	F/2	Married	50–60(2)	B.S.	Financial aid administrator
Heloise	Exp	71	F/4	Married	35–40(r)	College	Housewife
Louise	IAM	51	F/3	Married	50–60(1)	Ph.D.	Former teacher
Kate	Exp	42	F/2	Married	60–70(1.5)	B.A.	Former teacher
Janet	Soc	53	F/2	Married(2×)	70–85(1.5)	M.A.	Administrator
Randy	Soc	34	M/1	Married	30–35(1.5)	B.A.	PR writer

NOTE.—Pseudonyms are used for all of the informants. All of the informants except one (Karen, who is Hispanic) considered themselves to be of white/European/Caucasian descent, reflecting the homogeneity of the Centre County population. The VALS categories use the following abbreviations: Bel, Belonger; Exp, Experiential; Sus, Sustainer; IAM, I am me; and Soc, Socially conscious. For income, the number in parentheses indicates the number of wage earners in the household (r, retired). For education, "college" indicates that the informant attended college but did not receive a degree; HS, high school graduate.

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