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Investigating life disruptive events and their consequences on consumption behaviors appears to be particularly important in contemporary societies, where people are increasingly facing new endings and new beginnings during life, making reconstruction and adaptation a necessary process.

JEL Classifications: M31

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by

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Abstract: Inspired by an on-going empirical research on consumers and their tales about disruptive events they have faced in their life, this paper illustrates the value of using interpretative hermeneutics for analyzing consumption during these transformations. Such disruptive events are for instance: Divorce, death of beloved ones, marriage of convenience, or expatriation. In these kinds of contexts, a hermeneutical analysis allows researchers to study punctual consumption occurrences (buying, consuming or dispossessing) as being an expression of a personal narrative re-building that facilitates a deeper understanding of underlying motives.

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"The hermeneutic claim is that is only because of life has this distinctive sort of narrativity that events can show up as episodes that mean something (or are meaningless) in relation to life as an unfolding whole."

Charles Guignon (2003, p. 44)

"A man is always a teller of tales; he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others; he sees everything that happens to him through them, and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it."

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*

Inspired by an on-going empirical research on consumers and their tales about disruptive events in their life, this paper enhances the appropriateness of using interpretative hermeneutics while analyzing consumption patterns during consumers' transformation circumstances. Such disruptive circumstances are for instance: divorce, death of beloved ones, marriage of convenience, or expatriation.

The core argument in favour of interpretative hermeneutics finds its root in the assumption of the existence of a narrative identity: The performance of a personal identity consists in structuring a story about one's self. In this story, different isolated actions, events or personages are brought together to give sense to a self-narrative. The different elements, which complete a personal story selected together within a structure that passes by a beginning, a middle point and an end, organize a flow that responds to a personal appropriation of time. The classic linear time we are usually familiar with is, in a certain way, challenged by a narrative that includes the time as it is experienced in life.

Transformations in life that follow disruptive events are moments that usually generate a personal narrative reconstruction: an exercise consisting in rewriting one's story

by taking into account not only the latest events in life but also personages, events or actions that seem to be sleeping in our past. Different patterns in life are, in this way, built by leveraging all the “other” selves we have forgotten while living a non disrupted life.

This process of selecting personages, events and meanings that will form a new version of our personal narrative is not an abstract work, it implies action and action readiness (intentionality): (i) action as the way we behave after a disruptive event reflects shifting to a new version of our personal story; (ii) action readiness in the sense that we will maintain in the future, once our new story is in place, an active set of behaviours that will consolidate this new version and make it more credible.

Changing a story implies then behaving accordingly, and sharing with others the version we want them to support. This creative process of becoming someone else mobilizes therefore alternative ways of expression, one of the most symbolic, of which being consumption (Schouten, 1991). Consumption should be here understood not only as a purchasing activity but also as a consuming or dispossessing process.

In this context, hermeneutics, known as the art of interpreting human expressions, appears as a key tool in the interpretation of narratives reconstructions after disruptive events. Hermeneutics proposes to study narratives by going back and forth and establishing links between isolated actions, events or personages and a personal story. This process allows researchers to understand the sense of punctual consumption activities as being an expression of a particular personal narrative re-building.

The following section will (i) present the core idea of hermeneutics and its link with narrative identity; (ii) illustrate the advantage of hermeneutics by presenting the preliminary results of on-going research; and (iii) conclude by enhancing the use of hermeneutical

analysis in contemporary societies, in which people are increasingly facing new endings and new beginnings in life, making reconstruction and adaptation necessary for preserving the coherence of one's self.

ABOUT THE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH AND HOW IT LINKS TO NARRATIVE IDENTITY

The term "hermeneutics" evokes Hermes, the messenger of ancient Greek gods, but also, the god of travelers, diplomats, interpreters and bandits. In the philosophical context, hermeneutics is known as the art of interpretation; it first started as being exclusively a technique in the field of biblical studies to reveal the truth in sacred texts during Middle Age and Renaissance. Later on, it evolved into a more general theory of interpretation, covering every form of human expression: for e.g. texts, art and actions (Guignon, 2003). It could therefore certainly be said that there is a multiplicity of hermeneutical approaches that differ substantially one from each other by their philosophical objectives and journey.

The hermeneutical approach followed in this study is in line with Ricoeur's proposal labeled *Phenomenological Hermeneutics* (Greisch, 2001): a combination between phenomenological descriptions and hermeneutical interpretations. Phenomenological descriptions refer to the study of the multiple ways in which the world is experienced including for instance perceptions, thoughts, memories, imagination, emotions, desire, body consciousness or social relationships. Hermeneutical interpretation, on its side, refers to personal narrative as a symbolic mean of bridging a diversity of experiences with the apparent coherence of a story.

Hermeneutical interpretation is only possible by taking into account the narrative approach to identity: we build our identities through narratives similarly as a novelist

constantly rewrites his personages. This kind of approach to identity guarantees the continuity of one's concrete life even after several disruptive events have taken place. It offers a self awareness of the human personal appropriation of the linear time:

“Because we are beings who act, and in doing so, initiate beginnings, endings and turning points within the succession of cosmological time, our actions give objective time its phenomenological character: time *drags* or *flies*; we *make time* for doing things; and we sometimes speak of entering a new era in our lives.” (Atkins, 2004. p.348).

After having illustrated the kind of hermeneutics in use in this paper as well as the necessary role it plays in identity building from a narrative perspective, we will use the rest of this section to illustrate some practical points of the hermeneutical process. These points are purely descriptors of the type of *rules* that a hermeneutical analysis implies¹.

Pre-understanding

There is in every hermeneutical analysis a role for the reader. During a narrative analysis we act as readers but also as researchers. Innocent readers do not exist: they place a special filter towards what they discover in people's narratives. For this reason, when two or more authors or reviewers participate into a hermeneutical study, there are often discussions about personal pre-conceived ideas they could form on the subject they are about to study from both professional and personal perspectives. In consumer research, for instance, researchers are influenced by their consumption experiences when interpreting consumers' narratives. This pre-understanding that is common to hermeneutics is in this methodology far from being a weakness. In contrast, it is considered as having a privileged access to a specific understanding of a personal narrative. An appropriated illustration of

¹ It is however necessary to mention there is no standardized definition of what a hermeneutical interpretation is supposed to cover; it will always depend on the type of phenomenon and context under investigation.

this, published by the Journal of Consumer Research (Hirschman, 1992), can be read in the study about compulsive consumption which has been written by a researcher that experienced serious addiction problems and.

Openness

We cannot imply from the inexistence of a restriction on the researcher self participation on the study that hermeneutics is purely about the researcher's point of view. Hermeneutics is on top of everything else a discovery experience. It implies exposing one's self to the narrative instead of imposing ourselves to the analysis (Salinas, 2006). Hermeneutics requires openness and the recognition of participants as experts into their life. It is being aware of the fact that what seems perfectly coherent and totally true may hide important knowledge highly unfamiliar to us.

Dialogical relationship

With a pre-understanding and the necessary openness, the researcher of phenomenological hermeneutics is in a way ready to engage in a relationship with the informants of his or her study in the form of a conversation that builds the meaning of a consumer experience in a constructivist way. It is in a first moment a relationship between the researcher and the informant, and later on between the text produced by the informant and the researcher. Study informants therefore act as guides for the researchers: they provide questions, meanings and ideas. The set of data-collection techniques are, in this sense, cooperatively developed (Thompson et al., 1989). In practical terms, this approach requires being flexible enough to build and revisit the study on the way and often takes more time than classic interviews.

Hermeneutic Circle

Classic hermeneutical interpretations are considered as moving in circles. Understanding means moving back and forth between the parts and the whole of the text. There is in this circle a constant coming back exercise to formulate creative preliminary hypothesis that are tested and often rejected and this process again and again until finding something appropriate to the data, to the cross cases analysis and able to resist participants' verification (Arnold and Fischer, 1994).

DISRUPTIVE EVENTS IN LIFE AND CONSUMPTION: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM HERMENEUTICS

Once briefly presented what hermeneutics is about and how it links to the narrative identity, this section aims at concretely exploring one case extracted from a series of on-going exploratory studies about transformations in life and their impact on consumption. Although, the size of the cases collected does not allow us to make cross-cases analyses, the summary of this case is representative of the kind of knowledge that a hermeneutical approach could bring for the study of consumers and their transformations in life².

Caroline's Case

Caroline is 28 years old and works as a police agent in Belgium. Her transformation story started four years ago when her brother passed away in a motor bike accident. Her brother had himself lost his girlfriend in a car accident while driving, three years before. Only a few months before dying he had been able to recover his sentimental life by engaging himself in a new relationship with a single mother.

« Louis est mon frère aîné qui, ces dernières années, avait connu un grand malheur. Mon frère et sa compagne, médecin, ont eu un accident de voiture.

² The case has been sanitized by changing names and signs that would allow the participant to be identified.

Alors que mon frère conduisait, un camion dont le chauffeur se serait probablement endormi au volant de ce dernier, a percuté la voiture conduite par mon frère. Sa compagne est décédée dans l'accident. Mon frère ne s'en est véritablement jamais remis ; durant les trois années qui ont suivi le décès de sa compagne, il a, non pas « tout fait pour aller la rejoindre », mais en tout cas, rien fait pour l'en empêcher. Après le décès de sa compagne, mon frère avait un besoin de pratiquer des sports extrêmes, voire dangereux. Il s'est acheté une moto et faire de la moto était un moyen pour lui d'échapper à la tristesse dans laquelle il se trouvait, un moyen de vivre les choses à toute vitesse (...) Après ces trois années, il avait enfin commencé à se reconstruire, il avait trouvé un emploi qui lui plaisait, il avait retrouvé une copine, il retrouvait goût à la vie. D'ailleurs le jour de son décès, il faisait un temps magnifique, mon frère était parti en France pour signer un gros contrat pour son travail. Heureux de cette réussite professionnelle, il était parti faire un tour en moto. Sur le chemin du retour, il a eu un accident de moto dans lequel il y perdit la vie. »

Caroline believes that her life gets reconstructed in multiple ways after having faced this disruptive event. Probably, we could summarize Caroline's main new perspectives in life into two major themes that come all the time in her narrative: Her new role in the family and the need to deeply explore new possibilities life could offer.

First theme: The family

“Les gènes peuvent pouvoir compter sur moi dans n'importe quelle circonstance»

Regarding her family, it has become more and more important for her to take care of the members of her family. She feels particularly responsible for the support some of them need. Caroline expresses her commitment and affection to her family by leveraging in multiple consumption dimensions: sharing together small routines e.g. doing shopping, going for drinks, or just offering them small gifts; but also important celebrations such as preparing a big surprise party for one of her brothers on his 30 years birthday.

« Je me sentais vraiment investi d'une mission vis-à-vis de mes frères et sœurs dans le sens où ma petite sœur avait un souci au niveau scolaire ou n'importe quoi, c'est à moi qu'elle téléphonait ou elle avait un problème avec mes parents, une dispute avec ma mère, rien de bien particulier, c'est à moi qu'on téléphonait. Donc, moi, j'allais à la maison pour discuter avec ma sœur

et etc, je me tapais quand même 60 kilomètres pour aller voir ma sœur, aller boire un verre, lui changer les idées. Ah Hervet, mon deuxième frère je lui ai aidé beaucoup par après, suite à une histoire financière et etc. Bon, Il savait qu'il pouvait compter sur moi si il avait le moindre souci, il m'a aussi une fois téléphoné, je me suis aussi tapé 60 Kms pour aller l'aider. Et Thomas, j'avais organisé un anniversaire surprise pour mon nouveau compagnon donc, Jacques, donc pour ses trente ans. Et Thomas avait trente ans aussi et donc, je m'étais dit, je ferais d'une pierre deux coups, j'organise pour les deux mais j'organise aussi du fait qu'il n'avait pas de copine. Et, donc, je me sentais un peu investi de cette mission. Aller si moi je ne le fais pas et il a personne qui va penser à faire quelque chose pour ce trente ans, quoi. Donc, c'est come ca que vis-à-vis de mes frères et sœur c'est comme ca que moi je me sentais investi de une mission et vis-à-vis de mes parents, mon père beaucoup moins mais ma mère c'est aller me promener avec elle, aller faire des courses avec elle. Il me semble que j'avais expliqué notamment mais, aller boire un café avec elle, lui offrir un petit truque, on va dans un magasin, elle aime bien je ne sais pas moi un petit gadget ou n'importe quoi je lui disais donc va voilà je te l'offre parce que je savais que des petit plaisirs comme ça que lui font de bien quoi... pour essayer de je ne vais pas dire cicatriser mais en tout cas d'apaiser ce cicatrice, un petit peu. »

Besides these traditional consumption experiences, Caroline also changed herself by completely recovering from anorexia, a sickness she had been suffering for almost ten years. She explains her recovery based on the idea that she now has the responsibility of taking care of her life as she does not want her parents to lose another child. Recovering from sickness represents various changes in consumption as it implies not simply eating but also experiencing the pleasure of being free to trip with friends or go to restaurants with other people.

« C'est que j'ai moins peur de partir en voyage avec d'autres gens dans le sens qu'avant il y avait toujours ce restriction cette peur de me dire, maintenant on est parti aux sports d'hiver on en a profité à fond je veux dire, point de vue boissons, point de vue bouffe des trucs comme ca. Mais, avant c'était, c'était du style peut-être je vais grossir ou comment je vais faire là pour ne pas manger. Maintenant c'est vraiment une liberté totale quoi et ce truc d'imprévue où on se dit parfois aussi à la limite puff on va partir là-bas, on va en profiter.»

Second theme: "Carpe diem »

At the time her brother passed away, Caroline had her life path already well defined: she was engaged with her boyfriend and most of the wedding preparations were almost done: dress, church, future house and was already planning on having a baby. However, she felt in love with someone else and decided to drop everything, whatever the consequences would be. While love was unexpected and an event that certainly was not linked to her brother's death, she certainly found in this close experience a reason and courage to move on.

« (...) je décide de rencontrer le curé qui a fait la messe d'enterrement de mon frère Louis. Je le connais bien, notamment par les mouvements de jeunesse. C'est un jeune curé, très ouvert au dialogue et surtout dans ce cas, neutre dans mon histoire avec Antoine.

- la maison, ce n'est que du matériel (pas encore de mariage, pas encore d'enfants) ;
- se mettre sur son lit de mort et voir sa vie passé avec ou sans Antoine ? ;
- contrairement à mon frère, j'ai la possibilité de « commander » encore ma vie ;
-

Brefs tous des mots, des paroles justes, poussant à la réflexion... »

Together with her new boyfriend, to whom she finally got married, she started a new life, more dedicated to enjoying the present. Consumption experiences are at the base of the multiple expressions of a life that respond more to an idea of "carpe diem". Some of the examples cited by Caroline are for instance holiday trips, allowing herself impulsive buying of more expensive clothes, acquiring a new car that responds less to utilitarian needs and more to esthetic criteria or going out at night to certain, sometimes more expensive, bars or restaurants.

“Donc, maintenant avec Jean j’ai appris à me faire beaucoup plus plaisir. Il y a un vêtement que j’aime bien où je me dirais c’est beaucoup trop cher pour est-ce que c’est, maintenant je l’aime bien bah, je ne dis pas que je l’achète à chaque fois mais je me fais plaisir. Donc, dans ce sens là ma tenue vestimentaire a changé aussi, j’ai acheté une nouvelle voiture, j’avais une petite voiture qui de toute façon avait plusieurs années, il fallait que je la change mais j’ai acheté une autre maintenant plus en me disant je me fais plaisir que par utilité quoi. Voilà, j’apprends, je suis plus égoïste, façon de parler, dans le sens où je me fais plus plaisir, quoi. Que ça soit d’un point de vue alimentaire, point de vue vestimentaire, point de vue sorties, point de vue de... Même avec Jean, j’ai dit voilà ce soir écoute moi j’ai envie d’aller boire un verre à ce bar là, j’ose le dire. (...) Outre ce cadeau, nous nous sommes fait beaucoup de plaisir et ce, grâce au fait que nous travaillons tous les deux, mais aussi et surtout parce que nous aimions faire plaisir à l’autre : un séjour à Euro Disney, un mini trip à Nice, les sports d’hiver, des vacances en Egypte, des vacances en Tunisie,(...)

Caroline clarifies that her behavior does not mean that she has become a sort of unconscious compulsive consumer, she just now wishes to put things more in perspective by taking into account the fact that life is a limited resource and that “carpe diem” is a new rule.

« C’est de nouveau, c’est plus un carpe diem quoi, c’est un peu une conséquence de tout, c’est une conséquence de Louis dans le sens où je me dis que je peux très bien avoir un accident demain et voilà, donc, j’ai envie d’en profiter un maximum. C’est une conséquence de Antoine dans le sens où j’ai envie de crier, et de me dire j’ai envie comme j’ai dit d’être égoïste et d’en profiter. Et puis c’est un bien être avec Jean, ça n’est pas spécialement toujours de voyages couteaux, c’est le fait de vouloir bouger, de vouloir découvrir des choses et vouloir les partager à deux quoi, c’est surtout ça et c’est tellement gai. »

Her current decision criteria are now filtered with this new “carpe diem” element and this situation has an impact on certain classic tradeoffs like should she invest or consume. This was for instance, the case when she spent in a big surprise party for both her brother and her boyfriend the part of the money she got from selling the house she owned with her ex-fiancé.

« c'est claire que le fait que j'avais vendu ma maison, j'avais un peu d'argent. Je m'étais dit bon voilà, c'est claire que c'est peut-être mieux d'investir pour la prochaine maison que j'achèterais où des trucs comme ca. Mais, là, je me suis dit j'ai envie de faire plaisir et j'ai envie de bien faire les choses et j'ai envie surtout de marquer le coup comme quoi je ne me foute pas de la gaule de Jean. Dans le sens où si je fais quelque chose, ca a couté un petit peu d'argent, mais si je le fais ce n'est pas financièrement mais c'est pour montrer plus mon investissement personnel, et je veux dire mon envie d'aller plus loin avec Jean dans ma relation, quoi, montre vraiment que je tenais à lui. »

Caroline's case is representative of the kind of preliminary findings we have learned from the cross cases' analyses. Consumption is used in multiple ways for expressing or facilitating changes in personal narratives: expressing care and closeness, rebuilding a way of living that takes more into account the enjoyable side of life.

We remain convinced these kind of insights put the role of consumption less in a mechanical context where the consumer responds to an external stimulus by buying something, and more in a context of life where desire is linked to a particular situation with a specific group of people in a concrete landscape. The hermeneutical kind of analysis in consumption offers an alternative for understanding the functionality of apparently unimportant routines, such as having a coffee, going for shopping or having dinner in a restaurant. People do not desire in abstract, it is always a constellation of desires that nourishes a specific theme that we want to preserve and enhance in the story we are constantly building about ourselves.

DISCUSSION: THE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH AND THE ACCELERATED WORLD

My preliminary findings in the study of consumers and their transformations tales suggest that consumption facilitates the reconstruction of personal narratives after facing a disruptive event in life. The way in which consumption contributes to this reconstruction is

double: it participates in the “material” expression of changes in one’s life while effectively performing the move into a new version of one’s personal narrative.

The advantage of the hermeneutical interpretation on consumption during transformations dwells in the inclusion of a life context in which consumption acquires a specific intentionality. Simple isolated consumption experiences as buying and selecting gifts in special occasions, going on holidays or preparing a party are covered with a deeper knowledge of the consumer context, becoming for instance, like in this case, transformative performances.

Hermeneutics within its narrative identity assumption allows researchers to access the hidden part of the most studied consumption processes and therefore open the door to marketers for recognizing the multiplicity of intentionality that is behind simple consumption gestures. We believe that the hermeneutical perspective offers a special lively kind of knowledge to further understanding changes in consumption patterns that are sometimes only visible to managers when acquiring, losing or retaining customers.

Studying consumers in transformation from a hermeneutical perspective would provide additional insights on a phenomenon that becomes more and more the case in contemporary societies. In fact, when choosing the words that best describe developed contemporary societies, specialists seem to agree on a kind of “disruptive” vocabulary: Liquid, fluid, movement, multiplicity of meanings, fragmentation, fragility, ambiguity and flexibility (e.g. Lyotard, 1978, Bauman, 2000 and Lipovetsky, 2004). These concepts enhance the presence of life in continuous transition.

Consumers are moving more and more to non-familiar contexts: Net migration from outside the OECD to OECD countries averaged 2.65 million persons per year between 1990 and 2003 compared with 0.79 million between 1956 and 1976 (OECD, 2007).

The first cohort of baby-boomers born after World War II recently entered their 60th year and started abandoning the labor market. In Europe, this phenomenon after decades of low fertility is creating a shortage of working-age population. (OECD, 2007 and EC, 2007) With the number of marriages declining and the number of divorces accelerating, couples having less children and later in life; the traditional family model seems obsolete:

“The traditional pattern of growing up in the parental home, finding a partner for life and raising a family and, for many women, widowhood is being replaced by a more diverse succession of situations marked by the separation and reconstitution of couples.” (EC, 2007, p. 12)

Contemporary consumers are living more and more in a culture that is not necessarily their own culture, experiencing more flexible models of work, quitting definitively the labor market or adapting to new family structures. Consumers are more and more in transition, major changes in life are frequent and this way of living requires the ability to learn how to live in new contexts, to invent new roles and to adapt.

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