Cooperation and Conflict in Family Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the family dynamics of the decision making process, in particular the issues of cooperation and conflict, in both two parent and lone parent families. Thirty individual and family-group interviews were held (five two-parent families and twenty-five lone parent families). The families all had low incomes, heightening the importance placed on the consumer decision making process.

Findings are considered in relation to the interaction between couples as well as parent-child interaction. Overall, cooperation was a more prominent theme than conflict amongst the families and collectivist values tended to dominate.

It has taken researchers some time to realise that family decision types, processes and determinants are not merely an aggregation of individual purchase behaviours (Hall et al. 1995). Rather, many purchase decisions are influenced by other family members (Lackman and Lanasa 1993). Many studies on family consumer decision making have focused on husband and wife couples to consider the role each plays in making consumption choices (Burns 1992; Krampf, Burns and Rayman 1993; Menasco and Curry 1989). However, the focus on husband-wife interaction in decision making conceals the fact that there have been changes in family structure. Consumer research has not placed enough emphasis on the plurality of family structures (Ekström 2004) and little is known about the consumption patterns of lone parent families. One exception is Ahuja, Capella, and Taylor (1998) who found that the interaction between parents and children differs between lone parent and two parent families due to the greater likelihood of parent and children shopping together. This study addresses the family dynamics of the decision making process, in particular the issues of cooperation and conflict, in both two parent and lone parent families. The interaction between couples as well as parent-child interaction will be examined.

FAMILY DECISION MAKING

Some research has examined the influence of children and adolescents in family decision making and familial influence in the socialisation process (Ahuja et al. 1998; Beatty and Talpade 1994; Cotte and Wood 2004; Palan and Wilkes 1997). It has become accepted that children have an extensive involvement in consumer decision making within the family (Hall et al. 1995) and Shoham, Rose and Bakir (2004) report that children under 12 years old influence some $320 billion dollars worth of household products every year. This includes those products for which children are the final consumer (Mangleburg 1990). It has also been found that children may influence family decision making in one-off, and even expensive, purchase decisions such as cars or holidays by initiating the purchase, collecting information about alternatives and suggesting retail outlets (John 1999).

Research examining conflict in family decision making has found a tendency for husbands and wives to minimise conflict. As Commuri and Gentry (2000) suggested, conflict has been an elusive concept for researchers because adjustment towards the spouse's preferences appears to be a common trend. Similarly a study by Belch, Belch, and Sciglimpaglia (1980) which also included children found that little disagreement occurs among family members during the decision process. Nevertheless, although serious conflict may be rare, Lee and Collins (2000) suggested that some form of

family conflict is probable due to the combining of individual preferences.

Belch et al. (1980) demonstrated that level of disagreement will vary across product class. They found that disagreement was highest for high-involvement products such as vacations and cars and low for products such as appliances and breakfast cereal. Additionally, the amount of disagreement was low for decisions such as when to buy and where to buy but disagreements were higher in relation to how much money to spend.

Some research has considered the way in which conflict is resolved amongst the family. Sheth (1974) suggested that conflict may exist due to different purchase motives or evaluations about alternatives, and attempts to resolve conflict may vary according to the cause of the conflict. Sheth (1974) highlighted four types of conflict resolution; problem solving (involving further information search), persuasion (interaction among family members to resolve conflict), bargaining (conflict explicitly acknowledged) and politics (the formation of coalitions to isolate the family member with whom there is conflict and force this individual to join the majority). Belch et al. (1980) found that problem solving is the most popular method of conflict resolution with bargaining and persuasion less often considered. More recently, Holdert and Antonides (1997) found that strongly cohesive families were more likely than weakly cohesive families to evaluate alternatives jointly, consider each other's desires, and have fewer conflicts. The most popular conflict resolution strategies among spouses were discussion and gathering information. Burns (1992) found that, in married couples, the wife has greater power and a higher degree of influence over the innovative consumer decisions made by her husband. Scanzoni (1979) noted that the greater the relationship, the greater the inevitability of conflict.

While some studies focus only on couples, Commuri and Gentry (2000) stated that measurement of conflict across all family members should become the norm. To obtain a comprehensive picture of family decision making, research needs to include the impact of children upon this process (Lackman and Lanasa 1993). Indeed Lackman and Lanasa (1993) go so far as to suggest that the exclusion of children will likely produce findings of questionable validity. Lee and Collins (2000) examined the impact of children on conflict resolution in the family decision making process. Results indicated that coalitions were a popular form of conflict resolution with fathers and elder daughters and mothers and sons working together to gain influence.

Palan and Wilkes (1997) discussed how adolescents employ a range of strategies to influence the outcome of family purchase decisions. These influence strategies are aimed at ensuring that parents cooperate with the wants of children. Bargaining strategies are presented as ways of ensuring mutual gain for both parties (for example, offer to do certain behaviours in exchange for some purchase) while persuasion strategies only result in gain for the persuader and consequently may involve some level of manipulation. Emotional strategies (e.g. guilt trips), and request strategies (e.g. expressing need) were also used to gain the cooperation of parents. As John (1999, 200) suggests, children learn to become successful "*influence agents*" through sophisticated negotiation strategies.

Although it has been suggested that families tend to minimise conflict (Commuri and Gentry 2000), much of the research in this area focuses on issues such as power and influence. Cooperation

has not been investigated to the same extent as conflict. Turning to research on communication studies, Sillars (1995, 377) suggested that *"A familistic orientation is associated with collectivist values such as sharing, cooperation, unity, loyalty, respect, and restraint, as well as behavioral norms pertaining to mutual assistance, family obligations, subordination of individual needs to family needs, and preservation of family honor or dignity."* Previous studies have suggested that parents often display evidence of a familistic orientation, for example, Miller (1998) found that love is the motivating factor for the bulk of shopping practice. This study will explore the issues of both cooperation and conflict in family consumer decision making.

METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviews were held with thirty families. The study involved five two-parent families and twenty-five lone parent families (twenty-four headed by females). The respondents were all from low-income families with an average household income of approximately £150 per week. The scarce resources heightened the importance placed on the consumer decision making process. Both individual (16) and family (14) interviews were held, depending on the family structure. In the first instance the primary respondent in each household, defined as the person responsible for consumer decision making including sourcing and paying for goods and services, was interviewed. In two-parent families and families with older children (aged 11–18), it was possible to arrange an interview with multiple family members simultaneously, providing valuable information about the way in which the family interacts. It was hoped that including multiple family members in the interviews would lead to the discovery of more insightful findings. The interviewing of multiple family members can permit a deeper understanding of the family dynamics in terms of each person's role and influence in consumption decisions. Interviews were conducted in respondents' homes.

Due to the paucity of family research methods advice within consumer research, it was necessary to consult the sociology discipline. Sociological researchers tend to support a qualitative approach to family research (Daly and Leonard 2002; Franklin 1996; Goldstein et al. 1996; Handel 1996; Stacey 1998). Franklin (1996, 253) suggested two reasons why qualitative research methods are especially relevant to studying families. First, there are many aspects of family interactions that are hidden, or may be too complicated to be easily ascertained with quantitative methods. Secondly, family researchers are "*outsiders*" to family life but qualitative research methods afford glimpses of the "*inside,*" through either prolonged observations or interviews in field settings. As Bott and Robb (1957) suggested, unless one is invited inside a home, one cannot learn much about a family.

Handel (1996, 342) suggested that it remains rare to obtain data from each family member and consequently, "*most family research is not family research but research on one of the component relationships in a family.*" However, Handel (1996) advocated the use of whole-family methodology as this approach can result in insights and understanding not likely to be gained from other methodologies, especially if the problem under study involves multiple family members. He suggested that no one person speaks for a family because the family constructs its life based on the multiple perspectives of its members. Acock (1999) suggested that in-depth interviews are an effective way of examining how family relationships work, by studying everyday family processes and making comparisons across family members and across families.

Interview transcripts and notes taken by the researcher formed the foundation of analysis. Data analysis was not entirely separated from data collection and analysis began while interviewing was still under way. The overlapping of data collection and analysis is said to improve both the quality of the data collected and the quality of the analysis (Patton 2002). Hermeneutics was used to interpret the data. This is an iterative process, *"in which a "part" of the qualitative data (or text) is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the developing sense of the "whole""* (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994, 433). These iterations allow a holistic understanding to develop over time, as initial understandings are modified as new information emerges. This part-to-whole process involved two stages. First, each individual interview was interpreted. Secondly, separate interviews were related to each other and common patterns identified.

FINDINGS

The findings are divided into two main sections. The first section considers the interaction between couples in family decision making. The second section examines children's input to food and clothing decisions.

Parental Cooperation and Conflict

There were five two-parent families included in the study. In these households the women tended to be responsible for managing the household budget and consumer decision making. For example, in a family interview with Fiona and Jason, Fiona (25, two children) claimed that she controls the budget because "*women are more sensible with money.*" Similarly, Denise stated, "*I wouldn't let him at it [money], he'd drink it*" (43, two children) Interestingly, her husband, Barry, agreed with this statement, suggesting that if he had control of the budget he would act in ways that would be detrimental to the family's financial situation: "*I'd think I was a millionaire.*"

Another reason given for women's responsibility for financial management and decision making is that it simplifies the task. This issue was discussed in a family interview with Erin (29) and John (30, two children). Although John would allocate resources slightly differently if he was responsible for the budget, "*I maybe wouldn't buy the kids as much,*" he is happy to leave financial planning under Erin's control because "*it saves the arguments if one person just looks after it.*"

In all the two-parent families, there was little evidence of any conflict regarding consumer decision making. One reason for this is that there is little choice about the way in which money should be allocated. Due to restricted budgets, these families have to allocate virtually all of their money to food, clothes and other essentials with little remaining for "big" items and limited opportunities for holidays, entertainment and discretionary purchases. Although the emphasis is on low-involvement products, it has been recognised that everyday, mundane consumption can provide valuable insights to knowledge of buyer behaviour (Kleine et al. 1992, Miller 1998). Findings reveal that the decision making process is not necessarily enjoyable or a pleasurable task. Some respondents viewed it more as work and did not appear to get any pleasure from having power over the family's resources.

Some women feel that there is a lot of pressure associated with being responsible for family decision making:

> Erin: *"I think if we were to go back I wouldn't like to do it, I would prefer to start off with John doing it. I don't like doing it because then it's me who has to worry about everything. I don't think I would take charge of it if I had to do it all over again."*
> Jodie: *"sometimes I wish I could put it on his shoulders"* (42, two children).

Being responsible for managing the household budget creates anxiety and stress for those involved and because of this some women would like to pass the burden on to their partners. In Erin's case, her husband could not answer questions relating to the family's income level, reinforcing how Erin bears sole responsibility for financial management.

Additionally, it appears that men adopt a more individualistic approach to money management and decision making while women are more communally orientated. For example, as mentioned above, Barry could not be trusted with money as he would spend it on alcohol. Similarly, in a family interview with Rebecca and James, Rebecca discussed how they organise their expenditure.

"He's a smoker, he'll get whatever he needs, you know what I mean, and then he'll give me whatever's left and I'll go and sort out what we have to sort out" (23, two children).

In this case, it is evident that James prioritises his personal needs. Rebecca, on the other hand, concentrates more on the collective welfare of the family. As such, James' individual strategies can conflict with Rebecca's more communally orientated family budgeting strategies.

Due to the limited number of two-parent families involved in the study, these findings are by no means generalisable. Rather, one of the overriding issues arising from this study was the diversity of families. This diversity is also evident in relation to the parent-child interaction in consumer decision making.

Parent-Child Cooperation and Conflict

Cooperation was a more prominent theme than conflict amongst the families. Indeed, the word "conflict" should be treated with some caution–in many cases, there is *potential for* conflict to arise, but collectivist values tend to overrule and prevent this developing into serious disagreement. The discussion will focus decision making in relation to food and clothing.

Food and Family Decision Making.

In many families, parents commented that they prefer to adopt an individual approach to decision making in relation to food provision. In some two-parent families, the father looked after the children while the mother did the food shopping for the family. Many lone parents also suggested that they find it easier and more cost-effective to shop for general household provisions alone. This is because expenditure tends to increase when they are accompanied by children:

Louise: "*I usually go [food shopping] on my own but in the summer she has to come with me [5 year-old daughter]. She wants stuff I wouldn't dream of buying, like a Barbie cake mix or something; she doesn't throw a tantrum or anything but you feel sorry for her and then you buy it. My bill is definitely higher when she comes with me*" (25, lone parent, one child).
Emma: "*when I take the kids they want everything…. sometimes you have to put your foot down……if they wanted grapes and those sorts of things I would let them get them… I'd rather go on my own, it's easier*" (36, lone parent, two children).

This suggests that there may be potential for conflict regarding the choice of food products desired by parents and children. However, as the comment by Louise suggests, it is not always necessary for a direct confrontation for the children's influence to be felt. Rather, the issue of guilt can encourage parents to cooperate

with children's preferences. This appeared to be a common occurrence for parents in the study. Due to their low incomes, parents from both lone parent and two parent families made great efforts to ensure that their children were not disadvantaged or made to appear different to their peers.

Potential for conflict over food choice not only appeared to be an issue for families with young children but also for families with teenagers, as the following extract from 16 year old Joanne and her father (48, lone parent) illustrates:

Joanne: "I'm not allowed to go food shopping"
Philip: "it doesn't work. I just get that wound up that I come home with a lot of stuff that I didn't go for."
Joanne: "I would get the same as my dad but then I would get a load of junk as well. I just buy loads of Jaffa Cakes and biscuits, typical teenager"
Philip: "yeah probably about £30 difference in the shopping basket."

While adults want to obtain the best value options, children "*want treats all the time*" and "*always wants to try new things.*" Although shopping alone is an easier option this is not always possible for lone parents, especially those who have no extended family network to help with childminding. Melissa described how she overcomes this problem.

"*If they pick something and it's dear and I know there's a cheaper brand I'll switch it in the trolley before they notice and then when we get home they don't notice*" (31, lone parent, five children).

In other words, the children in this family are made to feel involved in the decision making process but this is not carried through to the actual purchase. The children in this family are all below the age of seven so this pretence of involvement may not be an option in other families with older children.

Further rationale for cooperation with children is because it makes better financial sense to purchase products that children will eat rather than waste food:

Janet: "*I would go for the brand names rather than the cheap brands because they'll not eat them. There are beans at 12p a tin, and Heinz at 50p a tin; I have to pay the 50p, it would be stupid buying the other ones because they won't eat them*" (38, lone parent, three children).

Ironically the purchase of more expensive options can represent the most rational choice for these consumers. To summarise, in relation to food shopping, it appears that cooperation is most evident on the part of the parents.

Clothes and Family Decision Making.

Some parents discussed a similar situation in relation to clothing. Like food, it appears that parents are sometimes forced to cooperate with their children rather than risk wastage.

Susan: "*she is very particular about clothes….. half the things I'd buy her I'd have to give them away or bring them back because she's very very fussy. I spend a fortune on clothes and I don't really see the reason why I should*" (23, lone parent, two children)

Children from a young age are involved in the decision making process for clothing. Findings suggested that children find enjoy-

ment in the shopping process and like to take on the role of consumers. When asked to describe a typical shopping trip with her two daughters, Emma responded as follows:

> "*Danielle would be on a high because she's getting something new. She's very fussy…. I just stand there and let her wander round and she comes to me if she likes something and she tries it on and she gets it. Usually she has an idea what she wants, maybe she'd been in the town with friends and seen it. Danielle's buzzing, she's still hyper, wanting more, wanting to go somewhere else*" (36, lone parent, two children).

In this study, there was little evidence of any bargaining strategies like those mentioned by Palan and Wilkes (1997). As Emma suggested above, if her daughter likes something "she gets it." Indeed Emma actively discourages strategies of this nature:

> "*I don't get them to do anything for me round the house to earn money…… they have friends who do the dishes but I just do that myself….. my mummy would have done it for me, she done everything for us when we were young, I think they're time enough.*"

Again, one possible explanation for this may be the guilt factor. The desire for children not to be affected by the family's limited financial resources may lead to overcompensating as parents are willing to cooperate with the desires of children.

Some findings suggest that conflict is slightly more prominent between parents and older children. This tends to occur once children have reached an age when they can go shopping with friends and the mother is therefore no longer directly involved in the purchase decision.

> Interviewer: "*would you go clothes shopping with your daughter?*"
> Eva: "*sometimes but very rarely now….. most time she would go herself….. I would say 'oh you're not wearing that' but her friends are getting it and she's at the age now, she's 12, she would go with her friends and what they're wearing. Loads of stuff I find horrible but that's what they're wearing*" (45, lone parent, three children).
> Catherine: "*if she goes with her friends she brings the wrong things back and then you have to go and change them. Before she goes I say 'do not go to a shop where you cannot get your money returned.' ……she comes with the wrong thing and will say 'everybody else thought it was nice' but it's not. I try to coax her into going back to get it changed. That's the last thing I say to them before they go, make sure you go to a shop where you can get your money back, if not, don't spend it*" (40, lone parent, three children).

This suggests that older children may be influenced more by their friends and peers than their parents. Once this happens, conflict and disagreement over product choice is more noticeable. The potential for conflict over purchase location also becomes more probable once children become older. Perhaps this is particularly noticeable due to the financial circumstances of the families in this study. The adults generally frequent stores that are known to be more affordable. On the other hand, children may be more influenced by the store image and reputation. In some families, parents make attempts to ensure that children evaluate all alternatives when engaging in consumer decision making.

> Eva: "*If I'm shopping with Erin I'd always make sure she goes into [discount clothing store] to look because sometimes the clothes are near enough the same thing [as a more expensive store] but completely different prices.*"

As with food, conflict over choice of clothing appears to be minimal. Some parents make attempts to teach their children good consumer skills and others are willing to cooperate with what their children desire. Again, the diversity of families was evident.

Findings suggest that level of conflict may be dependent on the children's understanding of the family's financial situation. Some children are aware of the financial difficulties experienced by the family and consequently curtail their demands leading to greater cooperation in the decision making process. In other families, children's lack of appreciation of the value of money creates conflict. Amanda has encountered this problem with her 16 year-old daughter, Michelle. The interview with Amanda took place during the school vacation period and Michelle was unsure about whether or not she would return to school for the new academic year. This was causing some family tension.

> "*She doesn't want to work, she just wants to be handed the money. I've told her that if she doesn't get a job before the middle of August she'll be going back to school*" (36, lone parent, two children).

Although Michelle originally agreed to participate in the interview, she did not turn up at the scheduled time, despite her mother's request. Consequently it was not possible to obtain her perspective of the family's situation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It may be assumed that, as found in previous research, level of disagreement would be high in relation to how much money is spent (Belch et al. 1980), especially given the financial restrictions of respondents. However, in many families there was little evidence of serious conflict. The assumption of conflict is inherent in past family decision making literature with research highlighting the conflict resolution strategies that families may employ (Sheth 1974). One of the main contributions of this research is that families also employ a range of conflict avoidance strategies that prevent any disagreement arising in the first instance. These include giving one person control over the budget, cooperating with the wants of children or concealing consumer decisions that may be met with disagreement from other family members. This suggests that potential for conflict is not always realised. Many families in the study adopted a familistic orientation (Sillars 1995) to consumer decision making where collectivist values dominated.

This study contributes to understanding of interaction among couples in relation to consumer decision making. Previous research in this area has tended to focus on power struggles with each party striving for control over the family's budget. These findings provide an alternative perspective by highlighting that responsibility for the family's consumption decisions is not always viewed in a positive light due to the stress associated with this task. Although this study focused on low-income consumers, this opinion may not be exclusive to this group. The increased choice and complexity of financial products, the squeezing of household budgets created by rising utility costs and high levels of consumer debt all point to the difficulty of this task.

Findings illustrate the complex relationship between cooperation and conflict in family decision making involving children. Although parents and children may have different consumption

goals and conflicting preferences in terms of product and store choice, more emphasis is placed on ensuring cooperation. Additionally, the involvement of children in the family decision making process can run deeper than simply product choice. Rather, parent-children interaction can also be aimed at helping children develop good consumer skills such as improving understanding of the value of money, improving levels of product knowledge and emphasising the importance of comparing alternatives. Ensuring children are equipped with appropriate consumer skills is indicative of good parenting for some of the adults in the study.

The findings highlight the diversity of families. For example, in some families the choice of food has the potential to create conflict, in other families parents cooperate with the children's preferences without question. In some families, children have an understanding of the need to maximise resources and in other families they are a hindrance to this process. Each family has its own unique ideology in relation to structure, background, values, communication patterns, roles and responsibilities etc. As such, the decision making process varies from family to family, highlighting the impossibility of generating general theories about family consumption behaviour. Indeed, sociologists have suggested that the increased diversity of family forms indicates that "*the* family" does not exist (Bernardes 1997, 28) and the incessant use of the term "*the* family" implies that all families have the same format and denies any reality or validity to other forms of lived relations (Muncie and Sapsford 2003).

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