Consumer decision making in low-income families: The case of conflict avoidance

Kathy Hamilton*

Department of Marketing, University of Strathclyde, Stenhouse Building, 173 Cathedral Street, Glasgow, G4 0RQ, UK

This paper explores consumer decision making in low-income families. The focus is on the issue of conflict avoidance within the family when making consumption choices. Whereas previous studies have focused on conflict resolution strategies, this paper considers the ways in which families prevent conflict from arising in the first instance. These include individual control in purchasing and budgeting decisions, giving in to the requests of children and ensuring open communication about the family's financial situation. Importantly, the connections between the poverty narrative and the family decision making narrative are considered as the decision making strategies employed are not only aimed at avoiding conflict but also making experiences of poverty more manageable.

Introduction

Recent special issues have established the family as a key research site for advancing understanding of consumer behaviour (Ekström, 2004; O'Malley and Prothero, 2006, 2007). Some studies have highlighted the increased consumption challenges families face when there are additional complexities to deal with such as single parenthood or illness (Mason and Pavia, 2006; Harrison and Gentry, 2007). In this study, all the families were living on low incomes; another situation which placed increased emphasis on consumption decisions as financial resources were insufficient to obtain the goods and services needed for an 'adequate' and 'socially acceptable' standard of living (Darley and Johnson, 1985, p. 206).

Studies on the family have been critiqued for focusing on description rather than theoretical explanations that answer why certain behaviours occur (Mangleburg, 1990). Consequently, knowledge of what happens in the family remains oversimplified (O'Malley and Prothero, 2007). In this paper, the focus is on generating a deeper understanding of family conflict. As Coser (1956, p. 308) suggests, 'In every type of social structure there are occasions for conflict, since individuals and subgroups are likely to make from time to time rival claims to scarce resources, prestige or power positions'. Specifically the issue of conflict avoidance within the family when making consumption choices is highlighted. Previous studies have focused on the conflict resolution strategies used by families (Sheth, 1974;...
Holdert and Antonides, 1997). In contrast, this paper considers the ways in which families prevent conflict from arising in the first instance and at the same time identifies the connections between the poverty narrative and the family decision making narrative.

First, previous literature on family decision making is reviewed giving special attention to conflict in family purchase decisions and consumer decision making on a low income. Next is an outline of the methods employed for the study including data collection and analysis. Both single- and two-parent families are included and both parent–child interaction and interaction between couples is considered. The findings are presented in three sections, each focusing on a conflict avoidance strategy employed by respondents, namely, individual control, giving in and open communications. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion, highlighting that the decision making strategies employed are not only aimed at avoiding conflict but also making experiences of poverty more manageable.

**Family decision making**

Approaches to understanding the family are rather limited and have stifled a complete understanding of this aspect of consumer behaviour by oversimplifying family roles (O’Malley and Prothero, 2007). For example, Hall et al. (1995) suggest that studies of consumer decision making that have looked within the family have measured only abstract concepts while more recently Thompson et al. (2007) suggest that the prescriptive nature of previous research on the family has resulted in limited understanding of the complexities of family purchasing such as how families reach purchase decisions. This indicates that there is a need to focus more on the processes of decision making within the household rather than the outcomes (Davis, 1976).

Traditionally studies used husband and wife couples to consider the role each plays in making consumption choices (Menasco and Curry, 1989; Burns, 1992; Krampf et al., 1993; Webster, 1994). For example, in Burns’ (1992) study, which involved husband and wife couples both separately completing a questionnaire, it was found that the wife is more likely to be the primary force behind innovative consumer decisions across a range of product categories including household electrical products and food. In contrast, Webster (1994) studied marital roles in decision making from the point of view of ethnic identification. Based on a questionnaire that husbands and wives completed together, results found a significant positive relationship between ethnic identification and husband dominance in decision making.

Researchers have also recognised that children can have an extensive involvement in consumer decision making within the family (Ekström, 2007; Lackman and Lanasa, 1993; Hall et al., 1995). This includes those products for which children are the final consumer (Mangleburg, 1990), products for the parent, as well as products for the family including infrequent and even expensive purchases such as cars or holidays as children initiate the purchase, collect information about alternatives and suggest retail outlets (John, 1999).

Davis (1976) suggests that decision making within the family can either be consensual or accommodative. In consensual decision making there is either agreement about what value is relevant in the decision or no conflict across family members, whereas in accommodative decision making family members realise that priorities and preferences are irreconcilable inciting bargaining and persuasion strategies to reach an acceptable solution. In the following section, the latter is considered focusing on conflict in family decision making.
Conflict in family decision making

Conflict means ‘perceived divergence of interest’, that is, the belief that if one party gets what it wants, the other(s) will not be able to do so (Pruitt and Kim, 2004, pp. 7 and 8). It involves a ‘struggle over claims to resources, power and status, beliefs, and other preferences and desires’ (Bisno, 1988, p. 13). Within the context of family consumption, conflict can be defined as the disagreements that arise in the consumer decision-making process as family members strive to meet competing needs in line with available financial resources.

Sprey (1969) was one of the first authors to introduce a conflict approach to family studies suggesting that viewing the family in terms of a consensus-equilibrium framework is inadequate. However within consumer research, studies on family decision making have found a tendency for husbands and wives to minimise conflict (Webster, 1994; Commuri and Gentry, 2000). As Commuri and Gentry (2000) suggest, conflict has been an elusive conflict for researchers because adjustment towards the spouse’s preferences appears to be a common trend. Belch et al. (1980) also included children using three separate questionnaires that were completed independently by husband, wife and child and similarly found that little disagreement occurs among family members during the decision-making process. However, family decision types, processes and determinants are not merely an aggregation of individual purchase behaviours (Hall et al., 1995) and due to the combining of individual preferences of both parents and children, some form of family conflict is probable (Lee and Collins, 2000). As Sprey (1969) suggests, the family process is not concerned with abolishing individual differences but rather effectively managing differences.

Doyle and Hutchinson (1973) identify three areas of conflict within the family: who should make the purchase decision, how the decision should be made and who should implement the decision. Conflict may exist due to different purchase motives or evaluations about alternatives (Sheth, 1974). Belch et al. (1980) demonstrate that level of disagreement will vary across product class and is likely to be higher for high-involvement products than low-involvement products. Additionally, they also found that the amount of disagreement may be high for core decisions such as how much money to spend and low for secondary decisions such as where or when to buy. Holdert and Antonides (1997) found that strongly cohesive families were more likely than weakly cohesive families to evaluate alternatives jointly and consider each other’s desires resulting in fewer conflicts whereas Scanzoni (1977) notes that the greater the relationship, the greater the inevitability of conflict.

Sheth (1974) highlights 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. Other research has suggested that both sibling and cross-generational coalitions are a popular form of conflict resolution (Lee and Collins, 2000; Thompson et al., 2007). Based on both videotaped observations of family interactions and questionnaires completed by each family member, Lee and Collins (2000) found that fathers and elder daughters and mothers and sons tend to work together to gain influence.

Drawing on separate in-depth interviews with adolescents, mothers and fathers, Palan and Wilkes (1997) discuss 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 (e.g. 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.

**Consumer decision family on a low income**

Within the consumer culture, consumers are expected to respond to the temptations of the marketplace. As Bauman (2005, p. 38) suggests, ‘a “normal life” is the life of consumers, preoccupied with making their choices among the panoply of publicly displayed opportunities for pleasurable sensations and lively experiences’. Positive discourse heralds the benefits of a consumer society suggesting that choice can be seen as ‘the consumer’s friend’ (Gabriel and Lang, 2006, p. 1) and that consumers feel empowered when they are able to enjoy the consumption process (Wright et al., 2006). However, these benefits are not open to all as the key barrier to consumer choice is money (Gabriel and Lang, 2006). The poor, who are limited in their ability to respond to the consumer society, have been described as ‘unwanted’, ‘abnormal’, ‘blemished, defective, faulty and deficient’, ‘flawed consumers’ and ‘non-consumers’ (Bauman, 2005, pp. 38, 112, 113).

Low-income consumers encounter various exchange restrictions in the decision-making process. Since the publication of *The Poor Pay More* (Caplovitz, 1967), it has generally been accepted that the poor suffer price discrimination in the marketplace. Early research concluded that poor consumers in the UK face a consumer detriment factor of 11 per cent, meaning that poor families have to spend 11 per cent extra to get equivalent goods and services to other families (Aird, 1977). Low-income consumers have also been adversely affected by banking, telephone and natural gas deregulation as they have witnessed increasing related expenditures as a proportion of their incomes (Brobeck, 1991). Additionally, evidence has confirmed that supermarket prices are often higher in poor neighbourhoods, resulting in the poor paying more for grocery products because the stores that charge the lowest prices are not located in their neighbourhoods (Chung and Myers, 1999).

Another feature of consumer decision making for low-income consumers is limited product availability in that they have smaller assortments from which to choose (Hill and Stephens, 1997). This could be partly attributed to access difficulties. For example, in the food retailing industry there has been interest in the concept of food deserts, that is, populated areas with little or no food retail provision (Cummins and Macintyre, 1999; Curtis, 2000). Further, in the financial sector, bank and building society branch closures combine social distancing with physical distancing (Leysnson and Thrift, 1995; Kempson *et al*., 2000). The geographical redistribution of financial infrastructure, away from lower income communities, has resulted in geographical pockets of financial exclusion, economic decline, poverty and deprivation, as low-income households often do not have access to financial institutions and savings incentives (Leysnson and Thrift, 1995; Kempson *et al*., 2000). This ‘flight to quality’ tends to discriminate in favour of the more affluent and against the poor and disadvantaged (Leysnson and Thrift, 1995, p. 312).

Additionally, low-income consumers often have to suffice with lower quality goods and services. They may have no choice but to purchase second hand goods, an option that is almost always viewed as second best (Williams and Windebank, 2001). Low-income consumers share the same material goals as the more affluent (Hill, 2002). Consequently, reliance on second-hand goods and retail spaces can create alienation, as they signal that to be forced to consume second-hand goods is to be excluded from what is desired, that is, participation in the consumer culture (Gregson and Crewe, 2003).

**Methodology**

The study involved 30 families with children (there was at least one child under the age of
18 still living in the family home). Purposeful sampling was used, involving the selection of information-rich cases to permit inquiry into and understanding of the phenomenon in depth (Patton, 2002). The study involved 5 two-parent families and 25 single parent families (24 headed by females), recruited from urban areas of Northern Ireland where poverty rates are higher than in both Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland (Hillyard et al., 2003). In line with the feminisation of poverty (Hill and Stephens, 1997), female-headed single-parent families accounted for the majority of this sample. The respondents included both unemployed and those working in low-paid jobs with an average household income of approximately £150 per week. Respondent details are provided in Table 1.

In-depth interviews were the main method of data collection. Interviews are said to be an excellent way to tap into the areas of family life that are private, especially those areas that are subject to stigma (Acock, 1999). The interviews began in March 2004 and continued until May 2005 encompassing the full spectrum of annual events such as the summer months when children are on school holidays and preparations for Christmas. Given that the family constructs its life based on the multiple perspectives of its members, data collection methods that involve several family members can offer important insights (Handel, 1996; Palan and Wilkes, 1997; Lee and Collins, 2000; Pettersson et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2007). Consequently, the study included 14 family interviews involving parents and older children (aged 11-18); 5 interviews with couples and 9 with parents and children. However, given the sensitivities associated with life on a low income, in single parent families where the children were younger than secondary school age (11), only the parent was interviewed.

Although many of the individual interviews provided interesting and highly useful data, it was several of the family interviews that generated a deeper insight. Interviews involving more than one family member permitted a deeper understanding of the family dynamics in terms of each person’s role and influence in consumption decisions. Obtaining multiple perspectives and observing the interaction between family members were effective methods of understanding the complexities of family life. However, as well as practical difficulties relating to the scheduling of interviews with multiple members, it is possible that the mutual self-disclosure required in family interviews makes some respondents feel uncomfortable and prevents open discussion of sensitive issues. Additionally, in some family interviews there was a tendency for one family member to act as the main spokesperson, creating a barrier to obtaining multiple perspectives.

Interviews were conducted in respondents’ homes providing the opportunity to observe respondents within their natural environment. Researchers are ‘outsiders’ to family life but interviews in field settings afford glimpses of the ‘inside’ (Franklin, 1996, p. 253). As Bott and Robb (1957) suggest, unless one is invited inside a home, one cannot learn much about a family. Home interviews helped to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere, enabling the free flow of communication. Additionally, children seemed to appreciate this setting, with some of the younger participants making use of various ‘props’ throughout the interview, for example, one 14-year-old girl displayed clothing and shoes while talking about her consumption patterns.

Topics of discussion included family background information, financial circumstances, everyday life, budgetary strategies and hopes for the future. Conflict was not asked about directly as the original aim of the study was to explore the coping strategies of low-income families. Rather, conflict avoidance emerged from data as a key coping strategy for dealing with consumption constraints. In line with a social constructionist viewpoint, the respondents were encouraged to provide details about their daily lives and the emphasis was on obtaining the subjective perspectives of the respondents at the level of lived experience. A guide of interview topics was prepared but rather than being locked into one set of
Table 1. Respondent details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym (age)</th>
<th>Interview type</th>
<th>Weekly income (£)</th>
<th>Family details</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah (46), Martin (15), Ela (13) and Linda (11)</td>
<td>Mother, 1 son, 2 daughters</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>Single parent, 6 children (4 under 18)</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda (32), Ann (14), Lorna (12) and Gareth (11)</td>
<td>Mother, 2 daughters, 1 son</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>Single parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip (48) and Joanne (16)</td>
<td>Father and daughter</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe (43) and Jenny (16)</td>
<td>Mother and daughter</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>Single parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna (39) and Paul (15)</td>
<td>Mother and son</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet (38) and Pamela (16)</td>
<td>Mother and daughter</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>Single parent, 3 children</td>
<td>Unemployed (illicit income)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (38) and Ryan (17)</td>
<td>Mother and son</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>Single parent, 3 children</td>
<td>Unemployed (illicit income)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorraine (45) and Lisa (14)</td>
<td>Mother and daughter</td>
<td>107.50</td>
<td>Single parent, 3 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine (40) and Samantha (15)</td>
<td>Mother and daughter</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>Single parent, 3 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca (23) and James (30)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona (25) and Jason (28)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Both unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin (29) and John (30)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>John – chef Erin - unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jodie (42) and Daniel (45)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Both unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise (43) and Barry (40)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Both unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica (38)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Single parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Manager of local women’s centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah (25)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>Single parent, 3 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>Single parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Part time waitress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (36)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>190-200</td>
<td>Single parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Part time pharmacy assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda (36)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>135.30</td>
<td>Single parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Unemployed – not fit for work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare (25)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Part time youth worker, part time student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tammy (27)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>Single parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa (31)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>Single parent, 5 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva (45)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>110.50</td>
<td>Single parent, 3 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise (25)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Unemployed with voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie (24)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Full time student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Unemployed, full time student, part-time bar work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice (25)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Single parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma (19)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Single parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
questions, a flexible approach allowed questions to be adapted to suit the direction of each interview. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of informants.

Interview transcripts and notes taken by the researcher formed the foundation of analysis. Hermeneutics was used to interpret the data, defined as 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 et al., 1994, p. 453). These iterations allow a holistic understanding to develop over time, as initial understandings are modified as new information emerges. This ‘back and forth, specific-general-specific movement of interpretation’ is referred to as the hermeneutic circle or the iterative spiral of understanding (Arnold and Fischer, 1994, p. 63). This part-to-whole process involved two stages. First, each individual interview was interpreted in an effort to achieve an integrated understanding of each family’s situation. At this stage, specific consumption stories are considered within the context of the family’s personal history and in this way specific stories are understood in relation to the broader plot line of the interview (Thompson, 1997). Secondly, separate interviews were related to each other to establish any common patterns between families. Data analysis began before the completion of data collection as 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). In this way, initial interpretations could be verified with further data collection.

Findings

Findings reveal families in the study encounter many constraints in consumption practices. As such, shopping was rarely considered an enjoyable activity and indeed was described by some as a ‘nightmare’ ‘hateful’ ‘struggle’ and ‘stressful’. Tedious financial planning is a necessity for many of the families and impulse spending is rarely an option. As a result, the shopping experience is largely utilitarian and task-related and such consumers have few opportunities to act on hedonic shopping motivations. In response, respondents employ a variety of coping strategies to help them deal with and reduce the negative consequences that arise from their disadvantaged position in the marketplace. These strategies are extremely varied and include engaging in price comparisons, turning to the alternative sector (both the second-hand market and alternative financial sector), shopping in discount stores, searching for bargains, using products and brands in unexpected and creative ways, illicit income and drawing on social support (Hamilton and Catterall, 2008). Attempts to disguise or mask poverty are common through the portrayal of an image that minimises visible signs of social difference (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006).

Here the focus is on conflict avoidance as a key coping strategy employed by low-income families as a way to avoid consumption situations that would exasperate financial problems. This issue is discussed in relation to three themes: individual control, giving in and open communication. Strategies and examples reported below were not used in every family, rather people acted in ways that best suited their family’s circumstances.

Individual control

Conflict occurs in the context of human interaction (Pruitt and Kim, 2004). Consequently, one of the main ways in which the families avoid conflict is by appointing one individual to assume responsibility for financial budgeting or grocery provision. This is similar to Davis (1976) who suggested that role structuring as a decision-making strategy could be implemented by one person adopting the role of ‘specialist’ and taking responsibility for the decision. The various different ways in which this role was manifested are discussed below.
In the five two-parent families in the study, the women are the managers of the household budget with the rationale 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’. John was unable to answer questions relating to the family’s income level and expenditure patterns, reinforcing how Erin bears sole responsibility for financial management.

Although there was agreement that one person should be responsible for the household budget, the question of which partner should assume responsibility was more complex. Some women are happy for responsibility to rest with them, for example, Denise stated, ‘I wouldn’t let him at it [money], he’d drink it’ (43, couple, two children) while others felt there was a lot of stress associated with this task. As Jodie (42, couple, two children) stated: ‘sometimes I wish I could put it on his shoulders’. Research by Belch et al. (1985) has shown that family member influence varies by product category with husbands having more influence for products such as cars and television sets and wives having more influence for household products such as breakfast cereal and furniture. Due to restricted budgets, the families in this study have to allocate virtually all of their money to food, clothes and other essentials household products with little remaining for ‘big’ items such as cars, entertainment and discretionary purchases, helping to explain why the women tend to adopt the consumer decision maker role. To illustrate, the following extract illustrates Erin and John’s approach to their expenditure:

Erin: ‘I have a card for the electricity, I know what we need for the month so I go and put the money on that [payment card that can be used in local convenience store]. The phone is paid monthly so I know how much that is going to be every month.

Then I try and put money away for the oil every month, and I pay the TV licence monthly, mostly I pay monthly so you know how much you have…’

John: ‘As long as the bills are paid that’s the main thing… we don’t go out, only once in a blue moon [going out is a rare event]’.

Given this inflexibility in the family’s budgeting strategies, potential for serious conflict appeared to be relatively low as there is little choice about the way in which money should be allocated. Indeed one of the couples suggested that any conflict could actually be considered positively as arguments over the allocation of resources potentially could help to reduce expenditure.

Barry: ‘She would argue with me over things, ‘don’t be buying that’ and I would think you’re right and I would argue with her ‘ob you don’t need that’’ (40, couple, 2 children).

Thus the influence of a partner can reduce unnecessary expenditure by challenging the purchase of unessential items.

This preferred individuality also extends to parent–child relations. In many families, parents commented that they prefer to adopt an individual approach to purchasing food and other household provisions. Previous observation research indicates variation in children’s involvement in grocery shopping with some parents spending time listening to children’s proposals and others not encouraging any kind of involvement during shopping (Pettersson et al., 2004). In this study, findings suggest that parents prefer to follow this role structuring decision-making strategy because expenditure tends to increase when they are accompanied by children:

Janice: ‘I don’t mind shopping normally but it’s a nightmare if you have to do it when the kids get out of school because whenever they’re with you they want everything. The packaging made for kids
is a nightmare. Normally I would go on my own and they would just have to make do with it’ (23, single parent, 2 children).

Jackie: ‘I tend to leave him [5 year old son] with my mum when I’m shopping because he just picks all the chocolates and biscuits and goes mad. Even on a trip into town if I take him it’s a nightmare, he wants everything he sees’ (23, single parent 1 child).

Due to budget constraints the adults in the study want to obtain the best value options which can conflict with children who ‘want treats all the time’ and ‘always wants to try new things’.

Shopping alone is not only the preferred option for parents with young children, but also for families with teenagers, as the following extract from 16-year-old Joanne and her father (48, single 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’.

Again this illustrates that a role structuring consumer decision-making strategy where one family member assumes the ‘specialist’ role (Davis, 1976) can be an effective way of avoiding family conflict.

It is clear then that there is a connection between using individual control as a strategy for coping with poverty and a means of avoiding conflict. The limited financial resources that are available to families means that it is essential for the budget to be prudently managed. This appears to be simplified if allocated to one adult family member. It is also easier if children, who may not understand the need for consumption constraints, are not involved in shopping activities. These approaches both help the coping process and reduce the likelihood of family conflict.

Giving in

Another prominent strategy for avoiding conflict in family consumption involves parents giving in to the requests of children. This suggests that differing attitudes about the allocation of resources may not necessarily result in family conflict as parents often comply with their children’s demands:

Julie: ‘She [5 year old daughter] likes loads of pink stuff like toilet rolls with pink stuff all over them… she yaps on about those because of the packaging. Sometimes to keep her quiet I would give in and get her that… And then there’s kid’s toothpastes which are really expensive and sometimes I’d give in and get her those. I do say enough is enough because I don’t want to be buying all that stuff just for the colour of the packaging but if you’re shopping for an hour and a half and she’s going on in your ear, you’re just like ok then’ (24, single parent, 1 child).

Consistent with John (1999, p. 200) who suggests that children learn to become successful ‘influence agents’, in cases like this, parents give in to children’s repeated nagging in order to achieve an easier shopping experience. Additionally parents’ positive response to children’s requests can be viewed as a rational choice because of the view that it makes better financial sense to purchase food that children will eat and clothes that they will wear rather than risk wastage:

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, single parent, three children).

Sarah: ‘If I buy them cheap stuff they won’t wear them’ (46, single mother, six children).

This is particularly the case in families with teenagers as brand names appear to take on more significance. Ironically the rejection of cheaper alternatives in favour of brand name products can ultimately represent the best value for money for these consumers.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that conflict avoidance in this way is always driven by rational considerations as the underlying motivations are often much more complex. Emotional responses to children’s demands have a pivotal role to play in consumption decisions.

Louise: ‘she [5 year old daughter] 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’ (25, single parent, one child).

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. Palan and Wilkes (1997) suggest that adolescents make active use of guilt as an emotional strategy to influence parents in the purchase decision-making process. The current research suggests that guilt can also be an influential element of family decision making even if it is not consciously employed as a persuasion strategy by the children. Indeed, in many families there is little need for the children to employ persuasion strategies; as one single mother suggested, if her daughter likes something ‘she gets it’. In line with previous research on compensatory consumption (Caplovitz, 1967; Woodruffe, 1997; Pugh, 2002), these families are denied many luxuries that their more affluent counterparts enjoy. To compensate for this, parents make great efforts to ensure that they have access to those smaller and less expensive treats that are accessible to them.

As children age, the desire to conform to peer pressure is increasingly evident. This is felt by both parents and children. Children wish to experience a feeling of acceptance and belonging while parents want to ensure that their children are not disadvantaged or excluded from activities open to their peers.

Tammy: ‘she [9 year old daughter] doesn’t understand that I don’t have it [money], she tells me to go and borrow it … generally I would give into her because her friends are standing there with the money’ (27, single parent, 2 children).

Thus, giving in refers not only to meeting the requests of children but also giving in to peer pressure and societal pressure. This highlights that decision making within the family is influenced by a wider set of macro environmental forces. Prominent among these forces is the impact of the consumer culture. As one single mother commented, ‘It seems to be that it’s the done thing to dress your kids in brand name clothing’. Another single mother commented that she feels ‘bad’ about buying her children clothing from second hand stores, again because this is not the ‘done thing’ to do. When faced with a trade-off between economising and peer pressure, the pressure to conform appears to be too strong.

For some families in the study, the pressure and desire to emulate the consumption practices that are visible in consumer culture leads to sacrifices in other areas as parents redefine their priorities. This often results in juggling the budget to curtail spending on basic necessities such as food in favour of the latest version of Nike trainers or parents minimising their own personal expenditure to allocate resources towards their children (Hamilton and Catterall, 2006). In this way, it appears that consumption for children does not allow the same degree of flexibility as
consumption for adults whose consumption needs are more loosely defined. Previous researches in Belgium (Kochuyt, 2004), Sweden (Hjort and Ekström, 2006) and Canada (Power, 2005) have found similar results in relation to parental sacrifice and the prioritisation of children’s needs and wants to create ‘affluence amidst poverty’ (Kochuyt, 2004, p. 145). This provides evidence for Lury (1996, p. 6) who warns against assuming that there is a direct relationship between poverty and exclusion from consumer culture. ‘While poverty restricts the possibility of participating in consumption, it does not necessarily prevent – indeed, it may incite – participation in consumer culture’. However, it is also important to note that these strategies are not exclusive to low-income families but rather may apply to families with a variety of income levels. In Evans and Chandler’s (2006) study, parents from all social class groups confirm that they strive to ensure that their children fit in with peers. They argue that parents from both high- and low-income families realise that material possessions and consumer goods have become the currency used by children in their academic and social lives.

It appears therefore that conflict between parents and children is minimised through a commitment to the avoidance of social exclusion and ensuring that children are given every opportunity to enjoy their childhood (Pugh, 2002). Instead, the conflict is a personal one for parents as they struggle to balance the budget whilst taking into account the various tensions at play. Many are forced to juggle economic and social pressures as the desire to maximise value for money often conflicts with the expenses involved in accessing the consumption practices that are consistent with consumer culture.

Again, this strategy can be seen as both a way of coping with poverty and a way of avoiding conflict. In relation to poverty, giving in can be interpreted as a compensatory consumption coping strategy. In relation to conflict avoidance, giving in to children’s requests reduces the likelihood of family tension or disagreements in consumption decisions.

Open communication

While parents want to shield children from financial worries and the negative affects of poverty, they also want to ensure that children learn good consumer skills and effective financial management strategies. In this section, the focus is on the consumer socialisation of young people and their functioning as consumers in the marketplace (Ward, 1974, p. 2). This includes both the acquisition of skills and knowledge relevant to consumption and the learning and adoption of consumer motives and values (John, 1999). It has long been acknowledged that the family context of interpersonal communication has the greatest influence on consumer socialisation (Moschis, 1985) as children learn their purchasing and consumption habits from their parents (Grossbart et al., 1991).

In this study, families indicated that children had varying levels of understanding of the economic world. Some parents suggested that children ‘just think that whatever they want they should be able to get’ while others felt that children are guilty of wasting their money with Jodie suggesting that her 11-year-old daughter ‘would go into the town and come back with a load of rubbish’ (42, couple, two children). Similarly Emma discussed her 10-year-old daughter’s lack of understanding of her need to work, ‘her attitude is because she’s off school I should be able to take more time off work to do things with them’ (36, single parent, two children). These issues are not exclusive to families with younger children as in some families teenagers’ lack of appreciation of the family’s financial limitations also creates conflict. For example, 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 which 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, single parent, two children).

Thus potential for conflict may be dependent on the children’s appreciation and understanding of resource availability in that those who are either ignorant of or unsympathetic to the challenges of budgeting on a restricted income are more likely to incite family conflict.

However, parents had strategies in place to deal with and avoid conflict of this nature. In particular, maintaining open communication about the family’s financial circumstances was central. Findings are therefore consistent with Rubin et al. (1994) who suggest that a willingness to deal with issues directly is critical when managing conflict. In many of the families, 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 an interview with Maria (38, single parent, two children) and her 17-year-old son, Ryan, Maria mentioned that both Ryan and her other children are ‘made very aware of what we’ve got and what we haven’t got’. As a result Ryan maintained that he does not place unrealistic demands on his mother, relieving pressure at special times such as Christmas: ‘I don’t expect much’. Similarly, Brenda suggested that her children, aged 11,12 and 14 ‘know how much I get, they need to know that, sometimes I’d say to them do you think I have a money tree growing in the back garden?’ (32, single parent, three children). Parents of younger children also attempt to follow a strategy of open communication. Janice, whose children are aged 4 and 6 explains ‘I try and explain to them that they can’t have something because it’s too expensive and I don’t have enough money’ (23, single parent, two children).

Open communications is often supplemented with direct efforts to teach children good consumer skills. In some families, parents attempt to ensure that children understand the importance of saving. To illustrate, when discussing holidays in the family interview with Brenda and her children, she suggests ‘maybe next year we can go somewhere, you can all give me 50p a week and save up and then maybe next year we can go away’. In other 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 [more expensive store] but completely different prices’ (45, single parent, 3 children).

In this way, family communication patterns not only impact on the family decision process but also can shape the actual consumer behaviour of children (Hall et al., 1995). These strategies could be classified as examples of purposive consumer training (Moschis, 1985) that involve active efforts to teach children consumer skills. However, there was also some evidence to suggest that at times, parents unconsciously pass on their thrift and value-conscious attitudes to their children. An understanding of price is said to be key in aiding interpretation of consumption experiences that therefore underpins and supports consumer socialisation (Cram and Ng, 1999). Throughout the interview Brenda’s 12- and 14-year-old daughters hinted that they had learned the importance of ‘shopping around’ by observing their mother’s consumption practices. They displayed knowledge about the varying prices charged by different stores for food and cosmetic products. They were also knowledgeable about the price of clothing suggesting that their main motive is to minimise expenditure and obtain the best value.

Similar to individual control and giving in, open communication can equally be viewed as a means of addressing poverty and avoiding conflict simultaneously. By informing children of financial difficulties, all family members are made to recognise the requirement for smart
and budget-conscious shopping strategies to aid the coping effort. This open communication also increases the likelihood that parents and children will be driven by similar shopping motivations and values, reducing the potential for conflict in consumption choices.

**Discussion and conclusion**

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). This study suggests that families also employ a range of conflict avoidance strategies that prevent any disagreement arising in the first instance. These include allocating responsibility for the budget and/or purchasing to one person, giving in to the requests of children and ensuring open communication about the family’s financial situation.

However, it is important to highlight that the decision-making strategies employed by families in the study are not only aimed at avoiding conflict but also making experiences of poverty more manageable. In this way, conflict avoidance in consumer decision making becomes an important coping strategy in response to family life on a low income. Each of the three strategies discussed in the findings section can be considered on both these interrelated levels. The hermeneutic analysis therefore revealed that separate consumption stories about consumer decision making in the family must be considered in relation to the larger theme of poverty. Money is central to the lives of the families in the study and all consumption decisions are guided by budgeting thoughts.

While individual control reduces the likelihood of budgeting disagreements, it also encourages family members to avoid consumption situations that would enhance financial difficulties. To illustrate, excluding children from the grocery shopping not only suppresses conflict but also detracts attention away from unobtainable products that are beyond the family’s means. Likewise motives for giving in to the requests of children are 2-fold. On the one hand, this strategy reduces parent–child disagreement and on the other hand, it provides emotional benefits to parents who strive to ensure that children are not disadvantaged by the family’s financial situation. Thus by giving in to small requests feelings of guilt are reduced. Similarly, open communication and parents’ attempts to teach children good consumer skills helps to avoid conflict by ensuring that both parties have a similar understanding about consumption choices. On another level, this strategy also helps to ensure that financial problems are not further exasperated by unrealistic and demanding requests from children.

Research on conflict, conducted within an organisational context, highlights contrasting motivations for conflict avoidance. Drawing on previous research, Tjosvold and Sun (2002) state that in the East, collectivist values dominate conflict avoidance which is undertaken to support relationships while in the West, conflict avoidance is more likely to be driven by selfish reasons. This study suggests that these cultural distinctions may not be so apparent within the family context. The relationship is one of the most influential factors in the employment of conflict avoidance strategies within the family as purchase decisions are made with regard for the well-being of others. There was strong evidence of family cohesion, defined by Cox *et al.* (1999, p. 322) as ‘positive, supportive interaction among family members, closeness and warmth’. This study clearly illustrates that collectivist motives can dominate individualistic motives for conflict avoidance within family consumption decisions.

Although the focus has been on conflict avoidance, it is not the intention to idealise these families or suggest that conflict was non-existent. Families in the study were very diverse with some households being more prone to conflict than others. For example, as discussed in relation to open communications, in some families children’s disregard of financial limitations can incite conflict while in other families the opposite is true and
children’s appreciation of financial limitations aids the coping process. Further, while this study focused on low-income consumers, a useful extension may be to focus on middle class families. Given the recent economic downturn in the UK and the increased squeezing of household budgets driven by increases in fuel and food costs purchase decision making may become more complex for all families, not only those constrained by financial resources.

Biographical notes

Kathy Hamilton is a lecturer in Marketing at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Her research interests lie in consumer culture particularly in relation to consumer disadvantage, consumer agency and family consumption.

References


