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Shared or non-shared?: Children's different consumer socialisation experiences within the family environment

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Shared or non-shared?

Children's different consumer socialisation experiences within the family environment

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine children's consumption experiences within families in order to investigate the role that different family environments play in the consumer socialisation of children.

Design/methodology/approach – Key consumer socialisation literature is reviewed and family communication patterns and parental socialisation style studies are introduced. Such studies argue for the homogenous and shared nature of the family environment for children. A three-stage qualitative study of six families is reported, incorporating existential phenomenological interviews. The voices of children and their parents are captured, and the transcribed interview texts are analyzed on two levels (within and across family cases) using a hermeneutical process.

Findings – The findings of the study point towards the differential treatment of children within the family environment by both parents and siblings. It is proposed that children inhabit a unique position, or micro-environment, within their family setting. Consumer micro-environments are introduced; these have important implications in terms of children's consumption behaviour and, more importantly, their consumer socialisation process within the family setting.

Research limitations/implications – Consumer micro-environments have potentially important implications in any re-evaluation of the literature on consumer socialisation, and it is suggested that children may not have equal access to socialisation advice and support offered by family members. A limited number of families and family types are recruited in this exploratory study, and scope exists to explore family micro-environments across a greater variety of family forms.

Originality/value – A series of micro-environments, which have implications for the consumer socialisation of children, will be developed on a theoretical level. Existing consumer research views the family environment in homogenous terms, with suggestions that children are socialised by their parents in a similar manner (inhabiting a shared family environment). These findings problematise such a view and also offer insights into the role played by siblings in the consumer socialisation process.

Keywords Socialisation, Children, Family, Micro-environments, Non-shared, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Children's consumption experiences within families were examined in order to investigate the role that the family environment plays in the consumer socialisation of children. How children make and influence consumption decisions, and how they are socialised into the role of consumers, remain pivotal issues for marketers (see, for example, John, 1999; Ekström, 2006). Globally, children spend $300 billion of their own pocket money and income annually and also influence a further $1.88 trillion of family expenditure (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003).

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Considerable gaps exist in our understanding of how environmental influences such as the family setting shape the socialisation process (Ekström, 2006; John, 1999). Consumer research (Carlson *et al.*, 2001) has focussed on parents' socialisation efforts within the family, which is largely dependent on the adoption of one of a variety of family communication patterns (Carlson *et al.*, 1994) and parenting styles (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988). Such research underlines the assumption within consumer research that the family environment is homogenous and shared equally by all children (i.e. that siblings will be socialised by their parents and learn about consumption within their family in a similar manner). Recent research within the field of child development, however, points towards parental differential treatment (PDT) of siblings and to the "non-shared" family environment (see, for instance, Shebloski *et al.*, 2005; Suitor *et al.*, 2008). This latest work has not been incorporated into consumer socialisation research.

Existing theories of consumer socialisation are revisited. Children's consumption experiences within families at a disaggregated level (e.g. parent-child; child-child) are then investigated, and the variety of familial micro-environments inhabited by children is highlighted. Micro-environments represent a child's unique position and experiences within their family's ecology. From here, the way in which familial micro-environments work to create consumer micro-environments that exert differential types of influence on children's socialisation as consumers are identified.

The research findings of this study point towards a more nuanced reading of family life that is characterised by the heterogeneity rather than the homogeneity of the family environment, signalling the important role that children play in shaping the consumer behaviour of their siblings – a much neglected topic within consumer research (Cotte and Wood, 2004).

1.1 Consumer socialisation

Consumer socialisation is a developmental process "by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace" (Ward, 1974, p. 2). Most socialisation research focuses on learning during childhood and adolescence (John, 1999; Ekström, 2006). The present research concentrates on the role and influence that the family (as the socialisation agent) plays in the socialisation process (Moore *et al.*, 2002).

1.2 The role of the family in consumer socialisation

The socialisation of children is influenced by a variety of agents including: the family (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988; Cotte and Wood, 2004); peers (Bachman *et al.*, 1993; Mandrik *et al.*, 2005); the media (Carlson *et al.*, 2001; O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997); institutional organisations such as the school (Shim, 1996) and care providers (Cook, 1994); and culture (Singh *et al.*, 2003).

Given parents' proximity to children their influence is the most pervasive and important of all socialisation agents (Caruana and Vassallo, 2003), particularly for younger children. During the formative years parents particularly influence their child's motivations, attitudes and behaviours about the marketplace by engaging with their purchasing requests, providing children with allowances and pocket money and taking them on accompanied shopping trips (John, 1999). Parents therefore offer children "purposive training" when learning about consumer roles (Carlson *et al.*, 1994, p. 28), although the intentional and overt transmission of consumption information

from parent to child is questioned by some researchers who view consumer socialisation as a more subtle interpersonal process (John, 1999; Epp and Price, 2008). As children age, a shift from parental influence to peer influence is likely to occur, but this does not necessarily mean the influence of parents is replaced (Palan, 1998).

To date, the role that siblings may play in influencing the socialisation process of their brothers and sisters and in the intra-generational transmission of consumption advice, attitudes or opinions related to consumer socialisation has been largely overlooked. Tinson and Nuttall (2007), however, highlighted the borrowing and sharing practices that occur amongst siblings which shape their consumption and socialisation, and Cotte and Wood (2004) suggested that innovative consumption behaviour can be influenced intra-generationally.

The role of parents in consumer socialisation has been linked to parental communication patterns and parental socialisation styles (Carlson *et al.*, 2001; John, 1999). John (1999) suggests that the dominant communication environment in the family shapes how parents socialise their children into the consumer role. Family communication patterns (FCP), i.e. the frequency, type, and quality of communication that takes place amongst family members (Moore and Moschis, 1981), affect the ways in which parents discuss consumption-related issues with their children and influence their ability to acquire consumption-related information (Mandrik *et al.*, 2005). The quality of the consumption-related communication that takes place between parent and child has been found to be positively related to the consumer activity of children, impacting on their acquisition of consumer skills and knowledge and their involvement in family decision-making (Chaplin and John, 2007; Palan, 1998).

Two dimensions have been identified in family communication patterns: socio- and concept-orientations (Carlson *et al.*, 1994; Moschis, 1985; Moschis and Moore, 1984; Moschis *et al.*, 1983). Socio-orientated communication is intended to produce obedience from the child (Caruana and Vassallo, 2003), and advocates the monitoring and control of children's consumption activities. On the other hand, concept-orientated messages encourage children to develop their own competence as consumers (Carlson *et al.*, 1990). A four-fold typology of FCP has emerged from the literature: *laissez-faire*, protective, pluralistic, and consensual communication. Little parent-child communication takes place within *laissez-faire* families (Palan, 1998); protective families stress obedience from their children (Carlson *et al.*, 1990); pluralistic families emphasise mutual respect in communication (Palan, 1998); and consensual families stress open communication and frequently communicate with their children about consumption (Chan and McNeal, 2003). The FCP typology has been criticised because data have typically only been collected from the mother (Carlson *et al.*, 1990; Carlson *et al.*, 1994).

Parental style, another facet of parent-child interaction, also affects the quality of children's socialisation experiences (Bao *et al.*, 2007). Neglecting parents neither seek nor exercise control over their offspring (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988), and parent-child communication is avoided (Carlson *et al.*, 2001). Authoritative parents encourage self-expression from their children (Carlson *et al.*, 2001), and will seek the opinions of their children in family decision-making (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988). Authoritarian parents try to control children and discourage verbal interaction (Carlson *et al.*, 2001). Rigid controlling parents are similar to authoritarians "except that calm detachment limits their emotional involvement in children's socialisation" (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988, p. 78).

The universal applicability of parental style has been questioned: "little is known, for example, on whether mothers and fathers display similar or different parental styles within the same household" (Carlson *et al.*, 2001, p. 287). Some parents admit that they favour certain children over others, developing very different family environments for children within the same family (Dunn and Plomin, 1990; Shebloski *et al.*, 2005). With the exception of Cotte and Wood (2004), consumer researchers have not examined how different consumption experiences within their family environment affect children's consumer socialisation.

By comparison, research in child development and developmental psychology places emphasis on the parental differential treatment (PDT) of siblings, viewing the family as a "non-shared environment" (Dunn and Plomin, 1990; Turkheimer and Waldron, 2000). PDT highlights that parents have a finite amount of resources (e.g. time, attention, patience and support) to give to their children and that parents may become "less consciously or intentionally equitable and more driven by preferences or child characteristics" in childrearing efforts (Henderson *et al.*, 1996, p. 47), violating the social norm of equal treatment of siblings (Parsons, 1974). The non-shared environment, "defined as those environmental features that differ for children in a family and contribute to different outcomes" (Feinberg and Hetherington, 2001, p. 22), represents environmental influences which make children growing up in the same family different from, rather than similar to, one another (Plomin *et al.*, 2003).

Belsky's (1984) theoretical framework of the correlates of parenting (Atzaba-Poria and Pike, 2008) proposed that the child's characteristics greatly affect the parenting he/she receives, along with the parents' personal resources and contextual influences. The PDT of children has been explored in relation to a child's birth order (Harris, 1995), temperament (Sanson and Rothbart, 1995; Schachter and Stone, 1987), gender and age (Crouter *et al.*, 1999).

Age, and more specifically the sibling age gap, is notably related to PDT, with younger children enjoying more warmth and involvement from their parents (Jenkins *et al.*, 2003). Other studies have recognised, however, that first-born children have a special relationship with their parents which is manifested throughout childhood (Jenkins *et al.*, 2003). Child temperament, especially the presence of irritability and negative affectivity, can evoke negative and differential parental behaviour (Deater-Deckard *et al.*, 2001; Jenkins *et al.*, 2003), and research suggests that adults do not behave in the same way towards an "easy" child as towards a "difficult" one (Atzaba-Poria and Pike, 2008), or to a child that has a temperament that does match the parent's preferences or expectations (Harris, 1995).

Studies disagree on how far parents favour offspring of their own sex. Some studies suggest that parents believe they can teach or model sex-typed behaviour or are better qualified to socialise children of the same gender (Harris and Morgan, 1991). Fathers are reported to spend more time with sons than with daughters (Raley and Bianchi, 2006), and to treat boys and girls differently in the areas of discipline, activity involvement and affection (Lytton and Romney, 1991).

Hitherto, consumer research has focussed on between-family differences and universal and homogeneous styles of parenting and family communications, rather than considering within-family differences and family micro-environments (Harris, 1995). This study therefore seeks to investigate how the differing nature of the family environment may affect children's consumer socialisation (John, 1999).

2. Methodology

Existential phenomenological interviews (Thompson *et al.*, 1989) with six families in the north-west of England captured the stories of 29 informants. The families were recruited through personal contacts, by online appeals in family publications and by contacting local family organisations. The families, as in other interpretivist studies (Thompson and Troester, 2002), were purposively chosen (Miles and Huberman, 1984) in order to illuminate the variety of familial arrangements (see, for instance, Commuri and Gentry, 2000).

The families recruited consisted of two nuclear families; a lesbian-headed family (with both biological and adopted children); a family headed by a cohabiting couple; a single parent (mother) family; and a blended family. We included family types that Harrison and Gentry (2007) highlight as having received inadequate research attention (for detailed profiles of the six families, see Table I). A smaller sample size was used in order to gain an in-depth understanding of complex intra-family relationships and capture the dynamics of family life in line with earlier interpretivist research (Thompson, 2005; Tian and Belk, 2005).

Interviews[1] were conducted over three stages and explored themes such as family history, family relationships and how family members got their own way. The stage one introductory interview was conducted with the parents/guardians, and the interviewer also met each child at this point in order to introduce himself. Following this initial interview, stage two interviews were conducted with the children. Given that children (particularly younger children) may feel uncomfortable in a one-to-one interview (Mayall, 2001), the children involved in this research were given the option of having a sibling present during their interview if they wished. Whereas some children preferred to be interviewed individually, other children joined in conversations with their siblings, with various children dipping in and out of the interviews at different times. Each child, even those who initially opted to have a sibling present during their interview, did go on to speak to the interviewer at some length (and out of ear-shot of other family members) on an individual basis. Our data collection with the child participants occurred over a relatively short time period, which meant that issues relating to the cognitive and social development of child informants were minimised. Stage three comprised a final family group interview.

The interviews took place within the family home in order to develop a relaxed and informal environment (Holt and Thompson, 2004); one interview was conducted at an informant's place of work. Each family was visited between three and five times over a period ranging from four to twelve months; this time period covered both significant (e.g. Christmas and birthdays) and mundane consumption. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim, and lasted between 60 and 130 minutes. The transcribed interview texts and field notes consisted of over 250 pages, which served as the dataset for analysis.

Each family member was invited to participate in the family and individual conversations. Ethical procedures and guidelines for informed consent (Mason, 2004) were adhered to for this Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded research[2], and this study received clearance from the University Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Parents were sent an information pack detailing the purpose of the research and were encouraged to discuss the research with their children. Once written consent from the parents was obtained, a child-friendly information pack was

Family pseudonym	Family type	Parents/ guardians	Working status of parents/guardians	Children/ages	Number of interviews	Time period of interviews
White family	Nuclear	Claire Brian	Administrator Sales rep	Robert (12) Lee and Kevin (10)	4	6 months
Baldwin family	Blended	Carole Ray	Sales assistant Plumber	Jessica (14) Nina (5)	4	12 months
Harrison family	Single parent family	Natalie	Unemployed	Mark Peters (21) David Peters (18) Luke Harrison (13)	3	6 months
Francis/Akua family	Lesbian-headed family	Fante Francis Barbara Akua	Office manager Senior civil servant	Kwame Akua (19) Helen Akua (17) Ashanti Francis (5) Kaya Francis (3)	3	4 months
Bright family	Blended	Pat Tom	Housewife Company director	Zara (11) Jack (9)	3	6 months
Jones family	Cohabiting couple-headed family	Debbie Paul	Childminder Plumber	Michael (14) Anna (12) Adam (9) Tina (7)	5	11 months

Table I.
Informants' details

sent to the children. Verbal consent was then obtained from the child informants. Informants were given an explanation of what they needed to do in order to participate, and were informed that their names would be changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Informants were also told that they could opt out of the research process at any time (reducing the potential for parental coercion of the child participants).

In order to give due recognition to the potentially sensitive nature of family life and inter-family relationships (Langer and Beckman, 2005; Lee, 1993; Margolin *et al.*, 2005), each family was fully de-briefed at the end of the project and the emergent themes were discussed with them. As our family informants were guaranteed anonymity, such feedback was given in general terms (e.g. specific cases and names were not used). Individual interview transcripts were made available to the relevant family member alongside the family group interview transcription, with parental informants taking greatest interest in this aspect of the research process. As with Hamilton and Catterall (2006), a financial incentive (in this study £100) was given to the families to thank them for their participation.

The interviews were interpreted using a hermeneutical process (Thompson, 1991; Thompson *et al.*, 1990). Emerging themes in the data drove subsequent reading in the literature. The data were analysed on two levels: within and across family cases (Thompson *et al.*, 1990; Fournier, 1998). The first level of analysis explored each family as a whole at the idiographic level, which allowed for categorisation of data from which larger conceptual classes emerged. These concepts were then compared across the family cases and global themes emerged which captured the essential dimensions common to all the participants' interviews (Thompson, 1991).

Both authors began the analysis with an independent general reading of each family's transcription. Having individually studied each family, the authors' insights and notes were compared and a shared understanding of central themes emerged. The interpretations and global themes that were identified were then discussed with another colleague (experienced in the analysis of qualitative data), who reviewed the transcriptions to establish that the authors' interpretations were firmly grounded within the collected data. The findings and interpretations were also discussed with the family participants during the final stage of data collection.

3. Findings

The main themes which emerged from all six families were, firstly, the differential treatment of children by both parents and siblings alike; and secondly, the different consumption experiences of each child within the family environment. The findings are presented in three parts and focus on the families which best illustrate each global theme. Part one highlights the many differences that are created for children within the same family by parents, which we identify as parental micro-environments; part two of the findings focuses on the differences which siblings foster for children within the same family, identified as sibling micro-environments; and the final part explores how parental and sibling micro-environments work to exert differential influences on a child's consumption experiences (developing consumer micro-environments for children), including the process of consumer socialisation. As the family stories illustrate, the micro-environments which are developed by parents (parental micro-environments) and siblings (sibling micro-environments) are not necessarily always supportive, but can sometimes be dispassionate.

3.1 Part one: parental micro-environments

Within each of the family stories parental micro-environments are apparent. Within some of the families certain children appeared to be favoured by parents over others, and it is suggested that this affects patterns of parenting and parent-child communication. Within the lesbian-headed family clear divisions in the care of the children resulted from Fante Francis's determination to adopt children of her own. Barbara Akua supported Fante's wish to adopt, but at the time lesbian and gay couples were prohibited from jointly adopting (Hicks, 2006). Barbara made it clear that she would not have the same level of involvement with the young children as Fante:

> Barbara: Oh no! No [. . .] I was quite clear. I'd done it twice and I wasn't doing it again [. . .] I wasn't doing all of it again. I don't do the ferrying and I was quite clear about that partly because my job isn't as flexible as Fante's and I'm away a lot, but also, not that I didn't want to adopt [. . .] and so I said that she needed to do all of that "putting to bed" business (mother; lesbian-headed family).

As a result, Fante is largely responsible for the care of her adopted daughters (Ashanti and Kaya), and Barbara is responsible for raising her two biological children (Kwame and Helen). Whereas Fante adopts a warm and supportive style of parenting towards Ashanti and Kaya, who inhabit a supportive parental micro-environment, Barbara is much more of a disciplinarian and values parental control over Kwame and Helen (who in turn inhabit a dispassionate parental micro-environment). Indeed, Fante feels that she may be too liberal with her adopted daughters, often giving in to their temper tantrums in public in order to avoid embarrassing scenes and arguments with her children:

> Helen: Mum deals with us [Helen and Kwame] the things we want and stuff [. . .] no means no to Mum. Fante's like the complete opposite, Ashanti and Kaya do whatever they want (child; lesbian-headed family).

> Fante: Barbara disciplines much more effectively than I do. You know she can do that, she's got that black woman thing of one look and one raised eyebrow and everything stops and I just can't do that. I'm much softer (mother; lesbian-headed family).

Fante summarised the divisions within the Francis-Akua family: "there's me and the girls, and her [Barbara] and her kids". Family division was also noted in the blended Baldwin family as a result of parent-child interaction. Carole and Ray Baldwin clearly dote on their biological child, Nina, whereas Jessica (Ray's step-daughter) is often excluded from many family activities:

> Carole: On Wednesday I finished [work] early too so I phoned Ray and he said that him and Nina were just going down the pub because it was a beautiful day. So Ray told me to get off [the bus] at the pub [. . .] I don't think we even asked Jessica to come with us, I don't think we did. So it was a nice family afternoon out (mother; blended family).

The relationship that Carole and Ray have with Nina and Jessica is markedly different for each child. Carole said that the couple "have a good child [Nina], and a bad child [Jessica]", with Ray going further: "it's not a bad child; it's a pain in the arse child". Whilst Ray spends a great deal of time with Nina (who inhabits a supportive parental micro-environment) he spends little time with Jessica (who inhabits a dispassionate parental micro-environment). Indeed, it is common for stepfathers to spend little time and adopt a disengaged parenting style with their stepchildren (Coleman *et al.*, 2000).

Step-parents in general are reported to favour their biological children over their step-children in blended families (Suitor *et al.*, 2008), as illustrated by Nina's experiences with Ray.

Natalie Harrison, a single mother of three children, also appears to favour one son in particular. Parent-child relationships tend to be closer in single parent families primarily because the resident parent does not have a companion from whom to seek advice and support (Mangleburg and Grewal, 1999). Single parents also tend to involve their children more in family decision-making (Williams and Burns, 2000), as Natalie does with her middle child, David:

> Natalie: I had difficult births with the first and the third yet David [second birth], it was just so easy. One little push and out he was. He's been a rock. He's always been very responsible [. . .] very together [. . .] he helps me decide everything (mother; single parent family).
>
> David: She's always asking me to do things all the time. Mark won't do them so I have to (child; single parent family).

Such is David's high involvement in this family that he often attends his younger brother's parents' evening at high school, pays the weekly bills and is placed in charge of the family when Natalie is away. Far from this antagonising his brothers (who both have ADHD[3]), they are happy for David to take on this major family role. Again, different styles of parent-child interaction are evident within the Harrison family, as Natalie comments:

> Natalie: I don't need to shout and pull my hair out with David, but I do with the other two. They need to be shouted at to do things, but not David (mother; single parent family).

This first part of our data illustrates the differences that are apparent within families, and how the actions of parents are shaped by both the dynamic of their unique relationships with, and the characteristics of, their children. This means that different parental micro-environments and multiple communication patterns exist within the same family. However, parents' actions only partly explain a child's different experiences within his or her family. Children, too, can work to create differences within families, as part two describes.

3.2 Part two: sibling micro-environments

Children are treated in different ways by both their parents and siblings. The siblings created different and multiple sibling micro-environments within each family, and these varied from contentious/confrontational (dispassionate sibling micro-environments) to collaborative/cooperative (supportive sibling micro-environments).

Anna and Michael Jones frequently fight with one another, reflecting how closely spaced and different gender constellations are often related to increased sibling-sibling negativity (Jenkins-Tucker *et al.*, 2010). Similarly, Michael's perceived parental favouritism antagonises Anna. Whilst being the eldest child proves to be beneficial to Michael in his parental micro-environment, Michael finds it hard to leverage any benefit from being the eldest child in his sibling micro-environment. This has important implications for Michael in accessing consumption information and advice from within his family environment (further discussed in part three of our findings). For example, whilst Anna, Adam and Tina Jones discuss consumption issues together (for instance which mobile phone handsets are deemed to be "acceptable" to own),

Michael is excluded from such discussions and his advice and opinions are rarely sought by his siblings:

> Michael: Sometimes [. . .] sometimes I would like to ask them, Anna, what she thinks about a mobile [phone] that I want, whether I'd get ripped for having it, what my mates might say about it, but I don't [. . .] they all talk about phones and stuff, but I can't join in (child, cohabiting couple-headed family).

Whereas existing consumer socialisation literature would suggest that as children age parental and family consumption influence wanes (Ward, 1974), here Michael illustrates that he would like to access consumption advice from his siblings. Siblings indicated that they do (or would like to) discuss consumption issues with fellow siblings, often in relation to technically complex and highly visible products. The children here used or attempted to use their siblings in a dual-stage process of seeking consumption advice, initially approaching their siblings for blunt and honest opinions. Siblings, therefore, potentially represent an important checking mechanism within the context of consumption decisions. The children who were able to access this advice then approached their peers for consumption advice or approval with a reduced risk of losing face and social standing amongst their peers, as Jack comments:

> Jack: I might ask Zara what she thinks about something first [. . .] she might laugh at me and ask me what I want that for, but that's not as bad as my friends laughing at me (child, nuclear family).

Preferential parental treatment can be problematic for siblings and often results in the formation of hostile sub-family environments (Suitor *et al.*, 2008). Robert and Lee White, for example, perceive their mother's yielding to their brother's (Kevin) influencing strategies as preferential treatment, and work together in coalition to counter what they consider to be Kevin's excessive demands on their parents' resources:

> Claire: It's all been very Kevin-centred, hasn't it? Brian would say that I give in to Kevin more [. . .] that's only because he's a handful. It's easier to nip it in the bud. Brian sees it as giving in, I see it as nipping it in the bud, you know, going partway there (mother; nuclear family).
>
> Kevin: I'm the talking guy [. . .] me and Robert pair up and then I talk.
>
> Robert: No you don't, you start an argument [. . .] it's me and Lee who pair up against you to stop you getting your way. You start an argument, we detest you.
>
> Interviewer: Well if you're the talking guy, how do you try to get what you want?
>
> Kevin: Lie. I'd say the other two wanted it (children; nuclear family).

Whereas Kevin inhabits a relatively supportive parental micro-environment and can access advice and support from his parents, he struggles to obtain such advice (often consumption-related) from his siblings. Children who display negative affectivity often evoke negative parental behaviour (Deater-Deckard *et al.*, 2001), but here Claire acts in the opposite direction, giving in to Kevin's demands and negative temperament for what she calls "a quiet life". Like Michael Jones, Kevin's siblings do not include him in many games or in many discussions.

This second section of our findings highlights the within-family differences. Whereas part one showed how parents create differences for their children within the

family environment, our empirical evidence in part two suggests that siblings can also treat their brothers/sisters in different ways. More importantly, as part three describes, such differences directly affect the socialisation process and consumption practices of the children.

3.3 Part three: family consumer micro-environments

The within-family differences created by both parents (parental micro-environments) and siblings (sibling micro-environments) work to uniquely position a child within his or her family. Such positioning sheds greater light on the heterogeneous nature of family life and on the internal workings of the non-shared family environment for children. Micro-environments also contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of the processes involved in consumer socialisation within the family setting. Micro-environments, we suggest, lead to consumer micro-environments which have potentially important implications in any re-evaluation of consumer socialisation research.

The concept of consumer micro-environments within families suggests that an individual will be uniquely situated to experience learning and training directly relevant to their socialisation as a consumer within the family setting. Depending on the characteristics of the child's parental and sibling micro-environments (which are also partly shaped by the individual characteristics of the child), he or she will have different opportunities to learn about consumption. Just as empirical evidence is offered in this paper to support the concept of family micro-environments, different consumer micro-environments also exist in the families where children have varying involvement in consumption choices and decisions, as well as different opportunities to seek family advice in order to learn about consumption, as the following examples help to illustrate.

Although Michael Jones is favoured by his parents (inhabiting a supportive parental micro-environment), he is less favoured by his siblings. Michael can easily influence the decisions made by his parents but he struggles to influence his siblings. Michael's brother and sisters, irritated by Michael's close relationship with their mother, work to eliminate or marginalise Michael from their consumption discussions. Anna Jones, on the other hand, is the trendiest of the Jones children, with Tina regularly asking Anna to take her shopping:

> Anna: She [Tina] wants me to take her into town with my mates and take her clothes shopping, but I don't think Mum would let us [. . .] it makes Mum mad because she buys all her clothes for her from Primark and Tina won't wear them now [. . .] she wants to wear stuff like I do from Top Shop (child, cohabiting couple-headed family).

Michael is ostracised by his siblings and misses out on Anna's advice. Anna, as the cool, fashionable and trendy sibling, is an opinion leader (much to Michael's annoyance) and an important socialisation agent for Adam and Tina (alongside their parents), as illustrated by the story of Anna's iPod.

Anna had recently won an Apple iPod in a supermarket prize draw. Adam and Tina were immediately fascinated with it, much to Michael's dismay. Michael had bought himself an iPod just months before, funded partly by his parents. His siblings had shown little interest in Michael's iPod and he was rather annoyed that Adam and Tina showed such an interest in Anna's iPod:

> Michael: When I got mine they just left me to it, they weren't bothered [. . .] but when Anna got hers they wanted Anna's, Anna's was better, better because it was hers and she's the cool one [. . .] so it was just better (child, cohabiting couple-headed family).

> Adam: Michael had one [iPod] before [Anna] [. . .] I think it was the same one, but I wasn't bothered. When Anna got hers she showed me how to use it [. . .] I'm going to get one for my birthday now (child, cohabiting couple-headed family).

Children have differential access to consumption advice and to important family socialisation agents. Michael Jones struggles to access his siblings' advice about consumption and Jessica Baldwin struggles to access such advice from her mother and step-father. In the following quote Jessica discusses the purchase of a new coat and highlights the lack of consumption advice offered to her by her family members:

> Jessica: Nina's not much use [. . .] she doesn't know if a McKenzie coat is naff or a Timberland one is better and there's no use asking Mum or Ray either. They're not bothered [. . .] I'm just left to it really so I ask my mates (child, blended family).

For Nina Baldwin, however, her parents play a much more proactive role in her consumer socialisation. They encourage Nina to save her pocket money and carefully consider her consumption choices (e.g. at Christmas), as well as discussing consumption matters with her and taking her shopping. Carole Baldwin acknowledges the low involvement that she and her step-father have in Jessica's consumer socialisation:

> Carole: We do much more with Nina really [. . .] we don't do so much with Jessica. Jessica's left to it really she sort of fends for herself [. . .] I think it's their character. Nina's much more warm to us than Jessica so we do things with her [. . .] shopping, we talk with her, Ray takes her to language classes at school. We don't have much to do with Jessica (mother, blended family).

Jessica Baldwin does not have the same access to consumption advice that her half-sister, Nina, has from their parents, so Jessica looks outside her family for help. Jessica inhabits a supportive sibling micro-environment (unlike Michael Jones), but the age difference between Jessica and Nina renders this less useful for Jessica in terms of consumption advice. Thus, Jessica turns to her peers and the internet. Even though literature suggests that peer influence increases during teenage years, good communication between parents and adolescents is still necessary for the adolescent to develop consumer skills (Palan, 1998), and such interaction between Jessica and her mother and step-father appears to be missing.

This final section of the study's findings has illustrated how a child's unique family micro-environment, created by differences in interactions with parents (parental micro-environments) and siblings (sibling micro-environments), works to create a unique consumer micro-environment for a child within the family. The children do not appear to have equal access to consumption advice and socialisation agents within their family. The temperament and age of the child appear to be the variables which influence parent-child interaction within parental micro-environments. Parental treatment and favouritism may in turn impact sibling-sibling interactions and siblings' willingness to provide consumption advice and support. Whereas certain children within a family are in preferential positions to learn about consumption from family members (e.g. Nina Baldwin), others are not (e.g. Jessica Baldwin). Such findings problematise what is currently known about the shared nature of the family environment in relation to the consumer socialisation of children.

4. Discussion and managerial implications

Significant gaps exist in understanding how the family environment influences the process of consumer socialisation (John, 1999). This study points towards the non-shared nature of the family setting in which children are socialised into the consumer role. The children inhabit unique niches or micro-environments within their family's ecology which exert differential types of influence on their socialisation as consumers. The different consumption and consumer socialisation experiences of children in the family setting have not been examined before.

Consumer research tends to view the family as a homogeneous – and therefore shared – environment. This assumption is foundational to many marketing theories regarding families, for example, socialisation styles (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988) and communication patterns (Carlson *et al.*, 1994), but it is challenged by the family stories offered here. Within the Baldwin family, for example, significant within-family differences were noted. Nina inhabited a warm and supportive parental micro-environment, with her parents adopting a consensual-type style of communication and using a style of parenting with characteristics resembling that of authoritative parents. Jessica inhabited a much less supportive niche in her family's ecology and is parented in a very different manner, with her parents utilising styles of communication and parenting similar to those labelled *laissez-faire* and neglecting respectively. Multiple communication patterns and socialisation styles were evident within each of the families studied, and little empirical evidence was found to support the widely held assumption that siblings inhabit a shared family environment. Parental differential treatment of children was evident (Crouter *et al.*, 1999; Suitor *et al.*, 2008) and was related to the characteristics of the child, lending support to existing research (Deater-Deckard *et al.*, 2001; Atzaba-Poria and Pike, 2008). Our evidence suggests that the degree of interaction, communication and socialisation support offered from parent to child is child-specific and varies between siblings.

Similarly, this paper also offers tentative findings about the relatively neglected but important role that siblings play in consumer socialisation. Marketing managers have long been interested in understanding how decisions are made within families, as Lee and Collins (2000) point out, and the influence that different family members have on consumption. The intra-generational transmission of consumption advice has the potential to be an important source of influence for marketing managers to access. Understanding how coalition-formation within families influences consumption choices would potentially allow more specific targeting of marketing communication messages within families.

The role of children as the early adopters of technically complex products is also evident within our family stories, with children greatly influencing their siblings' consumption. Whilst Cotte and Wood (2004) suggest that innovative behaviour is influenced predominantly through intergenerational means, we suggest that siblings can play a significant role in shaping such behaviour intra-generationally (cf. Anna and her iPod). Managers developing communication strategies should be able to leverage some of the influence that siblings have on one another in order to access important opinion leaders within the family setting.

Variation exists between and within families so that non-shared family environments emerge. Given the apparent metamorphosis of the family (Wilkes and Laverie, 2007), with the suggestion that twenty-first century family composition is

moving away from nuclear family forms, marketing managers are encouraged to challenge existing theories related to family consumption and to revisit taken-for-granted assumptions which may have been made in marketing to families (Lindridge and Hogg, 2006). Individuals within the same family experience family life in very different ways and the notion of a homogenous family life experienced by all, especially children, is highly questionable. The familial micro-environments which emerged from each family's stories in this study suggest that it is probably rare for any one family to be composed of a single universal family environment except, possibly, in the case of only children of lone parents.

Family micro-environments and consumer micro-environments therefore affect the socialisation process of children: family micro-environments point towards the heterogeneous nature of family environments, while consumer micro-environments indicate the different opportunities that children have to learn about consumption and acquire consumption skill sets within their families.

5. Limitations and directions for further research

This study endeavoured to move beyond the usual concentration on parents' voices in family research in order to capture children's voices. However, it is acknowledged that there were power issues within some of the families, which meant that the voices of each family member may not always have had equal weight; in addition, the involvement of the different family members varied with some of the families studied. Nonetheless, a variety of voices was captured within each family setting and each family member recruited was spoken to on an individual basis (significantly extending earlier consumer family studies).

In terms of access to the families and the setting of the interviews which took place, parents did grant full access to their children and their children subsequently agreed to participate. However, within certain families the setting of the interviews (i.e. where the interviews would take place) was guided by parents. Future family research could usefully adopt a more child-centric approach (Banister and Booth, 2005), where children are included in both the data collection *and* research design stages (see the sociology of childhood, Pole *et al.*, 1999). Utilising more innovative research methodologies, such as asking children if they would like to capture their views using a video diary at times convenient to them, within their own spaces, would recognise the agency and skills of child participants.

This study is limited to a relatively small number of family types, favouring an in-depth approach to understanding the complexities of family relationships and dynamics. Although exploring the effects of family type on the consumer socialisation of children was not the main focus of this paper, it was considered desirable to recruit family types which are not well reflected within existing family studies.

Scope exists, therefore, for investigation of the family environment across a greater range of structures or of one particular family form in greater depth. Similarly, the role of culture in the socialisation of children needs to be investigated and it should be noted that the families recruited in this study (with the exception of the Francis-Akua family) are all white and of British origin.

From an ethical perspective, providing the families with a financial incentive to thank them for their participation could have coerced certain family members to participate when they may not have otherwise offered their consent. Although a first

recruitment drive was launched without the use of an incentive, this did not yield any family recruits. Subsequently, therefore, a financial incentive was used to stimulate responses (following Hamilton and Catterall, 2006).

6. Conclusion

This paper has provided grounds for revising firstly the current understanding of the consumer socialisation process within the family setting, and secondly the assumptions about the shared and homogenous characteristics of the family environment that are the basis for other important theories about family consumer behaviour (e.g. socialisation styles and communication patterns within families). Through reconceptualising the family environment as non-shared, in line with views which are prevalent (and more current) in other academic disciplines (e.g. child development and developmental psychology), a more nuanced understanding of the socialisation process has emerged. Existing models of children's consumer socialisation have been problematised and grounds for reviving research interest in consumer socialisation, which has recently suffered a period of relative neglect (Ekström, 2006), have been advanced.

Notes

1. The first author conducted all the interviews.
2. The ESRC is the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues.
3. ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, is a neuro-behavioural development disorder characterized by inattentiveness and impulsivity.

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