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The Family and Consumer Decision Making: A Cultural View

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The family is one of the most important influences on consumer behavior, yet our models for relating familial patterns to consumer behavior are quite limited. Marketing, with its roots in psychology and sociology, has tended to make very Western and very traditional assumptions about the family, and hence about its effects on purchasing behavior. Today, however, two important changes are occurring which demand major reorientation in our thinking. One change is in the American family itself—e.g., the recent increases in childless couples, unmarried couples, or single member households. The other change is in the “globalization” of the market—the need to design products or promotional themes valid in many nations. Firms whose costs are too high to allow them to maintain separate lines of products and/or separate advertising themes for each country they sell in must take great care in designing products or choosing themes for a socially diverse international market. What we need, it appears, are some models of family behavior that are broad enough to encompass such problems and guide marketers in making decisions.

Anthropological insights can be a great help in establishing new models. Anthropology, with its traditional concentration on isolated tribes in far-off places, may not on the surface inspire marketers with its potential contributions to their discipline. In fact, however, anthropology uses relatively

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isolated cultures to develop models of societal behavior applicable to our own society as well as to others. Information on foreign societies can be applied to our own society in the same way the geologist uses data from the history of other planets to analyze the Earth's geography.¹

Sociology and psychology tend to be more culture-bound than anthropology—although they do have a long history of constructive self-examination. Their suggestions for alternative societal patterns, however, have generally been more abstract and utopian than plausible. Social anthropologists, in contrast, delight in discovering and expounding on other ways society may be put together, constructing, so to speak, “alternative scenarios” based on other cultures.

Such alternative scenarios are important to the perceptive marketer, who can use them in three ways: to make a better analysis of consumer behavior in the dominant market into which his firm sells, particularly when that market in itself presents considerable diversity; to anticipate ways in which his own society may be changing; and finally, to design marketing programs which will be of use in foreign as well as domestic markets—a strategy of considerable use in an era of pressures toward more international standardization of marketing.

These points can be illustrated with reference to a well-known television commercial. In this advertisement, Husband is angry because of Wife's failure to make Good Coffee, a fault which unbeknownst to either, is in her choice of the Wrong Brand. The marriage, apparently in danger of collapse, is fortunately saved by a neighbor lady who whispers the secret brand into Wife's ear. This little vignette contains four basic assumptions about the family. (1) Responsibility for purchasing decisions is clear; the wife in this case decides on the brand of coffee and is held responsible by her husband. (2) Discussion is argumentative, with conflict and resolution rather than consensus. (3) The marriage bond is unstable, such that something as minor as coffee poses a serious problem. (4) A neighbor, not a relative, comes to the rescue.

Suppose that this commercial were just picked up, translated, and shown in some other part of the world—for example, in India.² There the process of decision making and the relation of husband to wife are so different that the American situation would seem quite a puzzle. Why is the husband so rude? Why didn't the wife check with her mother-in-law earlier to see what he liked? Who is this busybody neighbor anyway? Americans, of course, have seen scenes like this before—if not in real life, then in soap operas. Even Americans familiar with the situation, however,

may not respond well to the commercial if they fail to identify—or come to actively dislike—the characters in the commercial. What is its impact on, for instance, the black family, divorced people (who wish coffee had been the only thing wrong), the cohabiting couple, or some family-oriented ethnic group? Will they be more amused, annoyed, or puzzled than impressed? It is at this point that anthropological analysis can be helpful.

HOW MIGHT FAMILIES DIFFER?

Families need not have the kind of rather isolated nuclear structure of husband, wife, and unmarried children that is so characteristic of many parts of America.³ The high mobility of a restless society and its rapid technical and industrial change have tended to scatter married children miles away from parents and from one another. But no rule says this is the way things have to be, even in well-developed economies. In most other parts of the world, parents and siblings count for much more after marriage. Among the wealthy upper classes of India, and to a certain extent in China, a large extended family, including brothers and their wives, may live together in one household. This pattern is rare in most of the developed world, where extended family ties are often maintained, not by co-residency in one household, but by other means. A new nuclear family tends to settle near the other members of the family and phones and visits frequently. In the U.S., some wealthy families are known for their extended family ties—e.g., the Kennedys or the Rockefellers. Other family members are seen frequently, gifts are exchanged, and their advice and support are sought or offered.

The extended family has persisted in southern Europe and in developed areas of Latin America. Since geographic mobility is less in many of these countries—which tend to have only a few industrial centers—families do not become as dispersed. Perhaps it is also the other way around—since families are strong, the industrialists do not disperse their offices and factories.

The direction and focus of the principal familial ties are also important. In Japan and China it is the father-son tie that appears to dominate familial relationships.⁴ Brothers are held together (after their marriages) by their mutual loyalties to their father (not to each other); death of the patriarch usually gives rise to family schisms. In India the mother-son tie is prominent. Although the father is important and the final decision maker, he is

distant and reserved and it is the mother who is celebrated in song, story, and fact. Mothers are also surprisingly powerful in Latin American societies. The author recalls one Peruvian friend who at the age of about twenty-five still regularly shipped all his shirts by bus from Lima to his hometown 100 miles distant so Mother could iron them as only Mother could; you can imagine that Mother had a strong continuing influence after his marriage. Mother's day—*El Dia de la Mama*—is a major celebration.

In the West, particularly in Northern Europe and the U.S., the husband-wife bond is the predominant tie, although, as in Latin America, it sometimes competes with other ties. Newspaper advice columns always support the husband-wife relationship over others. In China or Japan, in contrast, parental ties often take precedence over marital ties, even to the point of sanctioning divorce. One reason Mrs. Olson (not "Mother Olson") explained about the Right Brand might have been to keep in-laws out of the rather fragile marriage. Indeed, there is not in the United States a generally accepted form of address for parents-in-law. Most new spouses merely hem and haw at their parents-in-law until a grandchild names them.⁵

The impact of the Wrong Coffee advertisement depended in part on the great importance of the husband-wife tie which, being so exclusive, is subject to great stress. Unfortunately, poor coffee can threaten some marriages. The American middle class husband and wife must depend solely on each other for emotional support. With an extended family, in contrast, the husband has brothers and his mother to confide in and the wife her sisters-in-law or her own family. As a result, husband and wife may be less interdependent and close emotionally, and the marriage arrangement can be much more relaxed. In India, for instance, divorce is almost unknown and makes headlines when it occurs. One Indian student of the author's acquaintance used to watch Divorce Court on television every day simply out of amazement over what would cause American marriage break-ups.

In many families of other nations, decision making takes a different shape from that in America. In the U.S., we tend to think of decision making as a basically allocative rather than consultative process. We are anxious to "nail down" responsibility, even when it interferes with getting the job done. How many parents have seen their children squabbling over who spilled the milk instead of stemming the ever-expanding white tide heading for the edge of the table? (Contrast this with a certain European child who entered the room announcing, "A glass of soda has been spilled and we kids need help in getting it up.") Our management structures similarly lay great stress on fixing and identifying responsibility sometimes to

the detriment of getting the job done. One of the critical factors in the choice of the wrong coffee was that the brand decision was the wife's and hers alone, as was the responsibility of making the coffee—and that responsibility had to be fixed.

Many cultures, in contrast do not like to fix either blame or praise. The Eskimo avoids rivalrous competition and the passing of judgments on individuals.⁶ Another extreme is a certain Indian family of Sindi background of the author's acquaintance which shared the same bank account. The whole family drew from the same account and the father simply passed the bank statement around the dinner table to make sure all checks were legitimate. Clearly, such a system in a U.S. family would probably lead to chaos or at least to much argument. American children get "allowances" which they presumably may spend freely within their budget. Large purchases outside a family member's budget—a Blondie shopping spree—are subjects of great debate and wry humor.

The reason the Indian family can function well and the Western cannot in this domain is that the former has clearer constraints on acceptable purchases. Each individual has a sense of how much he should spend and a limited range of goods he is likely to spend it on. An analogy might serve to illustrate the differences between Indian and Western family budget control. The game of baseball clearly defines a player's position, and he must work within the constraints of that position to star. In ice hockey, however, the "position" is not clearly so restrictive. A defenseman may sweep in to score often enough to be the league's leading scorer, but a pitcher does not play first base or shortstop. Despite such freedom in hockey, skilled players pick up enough cues from the environment and from knowing each other's styles that they never become a mere mass of humanity following a little black puck. In hockey, as in the Indian family, the constraints derive not so much from what is specifically allocated to the individual to do, but from the shared aims of the group as a whole.

Participatory decision making of course involves extensive consultation. Decisions tend to "emerge" rather than to be "made." In India, again, few purchases are made without considerable consultation; indeed, an Indian hardly makes any decisions without consulting numerous people for advice. Whether it is deciding on a new job, adding a room to the house, making a governmental decision, or deciding to purchase a minor appliance, he never feels comfortable until he has checked with numerous other people before acting. "The Indian manager," remarks one writer, "favors delegation of authority less as a decision-making process than as a consultative

process. He is happy to be consulted but not to be left alone to make his own decisions.”⁷ Such an attitude is a carry-over from the family scene, where the purchase of any minor item would not be made until parents and siblings were consulted. Without such consultation, the Indian would be intensely uncomfortable in making a decision.

Interestingly enough, a similar pattern of consensus-seeking emerges in Japan, both in families and in business, despite the quite different family patterns. Managers seek extensive advice and usually wait for a consensus to emerge before acting. In this way they do not “lose face” if their decision should be wrong. Conversely, of course, credit or praise tends to go to the group rather than the individual.⁸

It appears, then, that two particularly important aspects of family life affect purchasing decisions—the pattern and extent of personal ties within the family on the one hand and its decision making processes on the other. It is accordingly of interest to examine the marketer’s problems in dealing with such different scenarios as these, involving different patterns of personal ties and modes of decision making.

MARKETING TO EXTENDED FAMILIES

Extended families are stronger in most other parts of the world than in North America, although there are substantial minorities within the U.S. and Canada where kin ties remain close after marriage. One finds extended families persisting among various ethnic minorities—Italians, Greeks, Portuguese, and among the French Canadians of eastern Canada and New England in urban as well as rural settings.⁹

Even in “mainstream” American society, however, there may be change. True, the birth rate is dropping, but the shrinking household size may be balanced out by a growing attention to parents and siblings. The single person (divorced or not yet married), living separately, may still maintain close family ties. Indeed, without a mate, his or her closest ties would be to the parent or sibling and since they would not be competing with a spouse for attention, they might even be strengthened. The maintenance of extended families, moreover, appears to be connected with higher income—whether in India or America. Kin ties become easier to maintain if money is available for telephone calls, air flights, maintenance of jointly-owned vacation property and the like.

With stronger extended families, marketing would have to adapt in a number of ways. Advertising messages aimed narrowly at the nuclear family would cease to be as effective (indeed, one wonders how effective many "slice-of-life" commercials are today in reaching unmarried or extended-family viewers). New opportunities arise for promotional messages aimed at different relationships. ("One thing about that son-in-law of mine—he knows his beer!") Relatively few advertisements in the U.S. feature any relationship other than the husband-wife or parent-young child. Johnny Walker ran some ads a few years ago with an old man's hand clamped on a younger man's and the caption, "He knows you've made it when you serve Johnny Walker Black Label." These advertisements however, are rather exceptional.

Marketers might also discover new possibilities of selling their products by means of drawing on personal kin ties. Americans frequently avoid selling to relatives, being reluctant to mix their personal lives with their business activities. "Never buy a used car from a relative" is a frequent admonition because if the car turns out to be a lemon, familial relations are poisoned. Yet in many countries the saying is reversed: "always buy a used car from a relative," because if it is a lemon he will feel obliged to make good on it. Among some ethnic minorities in the U.S., the American rule is not followed either. One insurance agent of Eastern Mediterranean background, for instance, sold an enormous amount of insurance in his first few years and did very well until he began to run out of relatives who could afford insurance.

Extended families also exchange more gifts; in fact, gift-giving patterns are good measures of the closeness of a family, and deserve further study by marketers. Among the author's Chicago-area students, those who have received Christmas presents from over ten people tend to be of Greek or Italian descent, living in closely knit urban or suburban neighborhoods. (These also tend to be the same people who have seen their first or second cousins within the last month.) The key role of gift-giving makes it a useful indicator of the closeness and direction of familial ties—what, for instance, is the pattern of gift giving among single, young adults living away from home?

Gifts tend to be rather more conservative purchases than those made for oneself. A gift must represent both the donor's and the recipient's taste and standards, the two of which may have only a limited overlap. Certain goods are also proscribed as inappropriate (e.g., underwear, detergent, gasoline), others are prescribed (e.g., plants or flowers for Easter).

Price is important. Donors try to avoid looking "cheap" and are more likely to go for a quality item. On the other hand, donors may not wish to appear ostentatious or obligate the giver to reciprocate with an inappropriately expensive gift. Hence it behooves the manufacturer to position his product as a potential gift and to use the proper mix of product, distribution, packaging and pricing to achieve an image of appropriateness.

MARKETING TO FAMILIES WITH PARTICIPATORY DECISION MAKING

We have seen that participatory decision making is a normal process in many families around the world but that the American family tends toward a more allocative type of decision process. Such characterizations are not absolutes, but tendencies. Clearly, "big-ticket" items like automobiles, houses, or boats are recognized as joint decisions in America. Yet many smaller items are not considered so and marketing research frequently does not even ask the right question. A "warranty" card for electric grass shears, for instance, asks for the age and sex of the "purchaser" allowing no consideration for a joint purchase. The answers accordingly could give a very misleading profile as respondents are forced into making a highly artificial distinction. Awareness of joint purchasing patterns is very important in American marketing today in view of the ways in which husbands and wives are sharing more household duties and the way in which children are consulted more frequently in familial affairs. An item may, for example, be jointly selected by a female over 35 and male under 15—a mother and son.

Participatory decision-making presents many of the same problems as does gift-giving. There is a need to make certain that the final choices are "acceptable" to a number of people. Electric shears, for instance, must please more than one person if jointly bought, and if a gift, the recipient also. Even when two or more people do not actually make a purchase together, consultation may have occurred before or a "sense of appropriateness" may have been made clear. Electric grass shears, for instance, are functional and could be considered as neither a "luxury" nor an extravagance. Hence within the U.S., as abroad, constraints on individual purchasing behavior may be related more to a consensus about what is appropriate and acceptable (in both product and price) than to specific budgeting

procedures. It follows that advertising messages aimed at one family member may not be effective unless others are also reached—e.g., the McDonalds advertisements not only tell the housewife she deserves a break but also present Ronald McDonald to attract the kids. This means a careful tailoring of both the message and its placement.

Participatory decision making presents interesting managerial problems. Children who have been raised to have a say in family affairs are likely to be unhappy if later employed in corporations where they have no influence on decisions. To adjust to this new type of employee, managers may turn to more participatory processes such as management by objective or contractual management. The headquarters-directed, “I am the Boss” type of structure may become less effective than in the past simply because families are less likely to follow that pattern.

MARKETING UNDER CONDITIONS OF CONTINUED FAMILY SHRINKAGE

A final scenario postulates the further disintegration of the family. The husband-wife tie or marriage bond has become so crucial that people become reluctant to enter into formal marriages. The woman wishes to avoid the “wifely” role and the man the responsibilities. In general such a relationship is “monogamous” in the sense that neither partner carries on with an outsider, but their partnership can be broken at any time by either member of this “free-floating couple, a marital dyad subject to dramatic fissions and fusions,” as one writer put it.¹⁰ In such situations the remaining social ties may not be to parents and siblings, but to people from professional, recreational, fraternal or other groups.

Such cohabitation suggests that the themes suggesting marital fragility or allocational decision making are inappropriate. If part of the woman’s independence lies in her ability to leave a living arrangement, she is not going to be responsive to themes which view break-up as an enormous catastrophe. Two independent people coming to live together “temporarily” (no matter how permanent in fact it is), must consider carefully their joint purchases because there is neither assumed permanence or legal protection of one partner’s investment in any property. It is of considerable importance who owns the furniture, antique lamp, or Norfolk Island pine. One would suspect that many purchases are either regarded as “gifts” or as

belonging to the purchaser and lent to the other partner. Such couples may also invest less in "household" goods. One effect has been a sharp rise in sales of cardboard and other inexpensive furniture, and in rentals of many kinds of furniture and appliances. The equality of the partners in such arrangements undoubtedly poses distinctive problems in the allocation of purchasing responsibility and in determining ownership of jointly consumed items.

CONCLUSIONS

Marketers must reassess their assumptions about the family. Many TV ads exhibit one kind of family which is typical of only part (even if a major part) of the advertisement's audience. Wearied housewives gulping pills, cleanliness-obsessed women in the laundry, teetering marriages, even little men boating in toilet tanks may be effective only in particular situations, leaving important portions of the market uninterested or annoyed. Product design and market research, moreover, must be aware of different functions of goods and different ways of making decisions in different familial situations. Otherwise marketers will fail to fit the marketing mix to a substantial portion of their intended markets both at home and abroad.

NOTES

¹These ideas are also developed in Wilson Brown, "The Marketer as Anthropologist," *Chicago Marketing Scene*, June-July 1970, pp. 6-14. One anthropologist who has effectively demonstrated the contributions that his discipline can make to analysis of marketing and other business problems is Edward T. Hall. See: *The Silent Language* (Greenwich, CT, Fawcett World Library, 1968) and *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, NY, Doubleday Anchor, 1969).

²Comparisons with India contained in this article were formulated with the help of Ramesh Motwani, co-author with myself of an unpublished paper, "The Influence of Family Relationships on Marketing: India and America Compared" (1972). This paper is summarized in part by Chester R. Wasson in *Consumer Behavior: A Managerial Viewpoint* (Austin, Texas, Austin Press, 1975), pp. 194-196.

Jennifer S.H. Brown has also contributed both constructive criticism and source material.

³There is a large anthropological literature on the diversity of familial forms. For one recent discussion of some of these forms see Raymond T. Smith, "The Matrifocal Family" in Jack Goody, ed., *The Character of Kinship* (Cambridge Univ. Press), 1975, pp. 121-144.

⁴Francis L. K. Hsu, "Kinship and Ways of Life: An Exploration" in F.L.K. Hsu, ed., *Psychological Anthropology: Approaches to Culture and Personality* (Homewood, IL, Dorsey Press, 1961), pp. 400-456.

⁵Shlien, John M., "Mother-in-law: A Problem in Kinship Terminology," in Hyman Rodman, ed., *Marriage, Family, and Society: A Reader* (New York, Random House, 1965) pp. 198-201.

⁶Jeanette Mirsky, "The Eskimo of Greenland," p. 78 in Margaret Mead, ed., *Competition and Cooperation among Primitive Peoples* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1961).

⁷Arabinda Ray, *The Indian Manager in Search of a Style* (New Krishna Publishers, 1970), p. 79.

⁸See Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970) for a valuable anthropological account of Japanese social relations in both familial and company contexts.

⁹Philippe Garigue, "French-Canadian Kinship and Urban Life" in Marcel Rioux and Yves Martin, *French-Canadian Society*, Vol. I (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1964), pp. 358-385.

¹⁰Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York, Basic Books, 1975), p. 280.

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WILSON BROWN is Professor of Marketing at Northern Illinois University, specializing when he can in international business topics. He has held two Fulbright grants, one to Peru in 1963-4, and one to Thailand in 1977-8, where he did research on technological transfer in agricultural marketing. He is co-author with Jan S. Hogendorn of a new textbook in international economics, *The New International Economics* (Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley, 1979). He has written on a variety of economic and business-related topics, with particular interest in the multinational firm. (See, for instance, "Islands of Conscious Power" in the summer issue of *MSU Business Topics*, 1976.)