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The Role of Household Norms in Household Decision Making

Jodie Kleinschafer, Mark Morrison and Roderick Duncan

Abstract

An understanding of how households make decisions is important for marketers and organisations who are involved with products that are consumed by the entire household; especially for organisations who face the challenge of managing demand for their product, such as electricity retailers. These organisations would benefit from knowing how household decisions are being made about the consumption of their product and how households choose to manage their own consumption levels. Yet knowledge of household decision processes is relatively limited in the marketing literature. Through the use of exploratory focus groups, this research provides evidence that household norms are a part of the decision making process used in households. Specifically, it was found that “household norms” exist and these norms are a part of the household decision making process, and are used to regulate and regularize decisions about consumption in the household. However their use does differ across household types.

Introduction

A review of the marketing literature reveals that “norms” have rarely, if ever, been used to describe the decision processes that are taking place within the household. While social norms have previously been linked to individual decision making (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and discussed as a factor of influence in household decision making (Lindbecks 1997), these social norms are arguably different to household norms. These social norms are exogenous factors that influence households. Arguably, social norms are the norms of a larger group, of which the household is only one part. Therefore, in addition to the influence of social norms, we contend that *within* a home “household norms” are developed, enforced and used to simplify decision making process.

In a forum on household consumption behaviour held by ACR in 1990, Wilson and Park suggested that drawing on theory from the organizational behaviour literature may be useful in understanding household consumption behaviour (Burns & Gentry, 1990). In keeping with their suggestion, the discussion of household norms in this article is based on the following definition of group norms developed drawn from that literature.

Group norms are the informal rules that groups’ adopt to regulate and regularize group members’ behaviour. Although these norms are infrequently written down or openly discussed, they often have a powerful, and consistent, influence on group members’ behaviour (Feldman, 1984).

This definition suggests that norms are often implicit rules of behaviour that help members of a group such as a project team, society, or indeed a household to understand which behaviours are acceptable and unacceptable. Further, as they are established standards of behaviour for given situations, norms simplify decision making processes for group members. In the following discussion, a number of reasons are presented for absence of the term “household norms” in the household decision making literature. Following which, evidence is presented that demonstrates that household norms do exist, are employed and are developed and maintained within household units.

Why the absence of household norms?

There may be a number of possible reasons for the absence of discussion about “household norms” in the household decision making literature. Firstly, the majority of the research conducted in marketing on household decision making has focused on *who* is making the decision and decision outcomes, rather than *how* the decision is being made, or decision making processes (Davis & Rigaux, 1974; Commuri & Gentry, 2000). Secondly, much of the research that has explored *how*, i.e. the decision making processes, has explored influence and conflict resolution strategies (Gronhoj, 2006). Thirdly, given the complexity of household decisions, most studies have focused on explicit decisions, which are perhaps more easily recalled than trying to unravel unspoken implicit decision making strategies, such as the use of household norms. We submit that given the focus of these studies, it is perhaps the case that researchers have been consumed with other areas of interest, and as such have not yet considered household norms.

Household Decision Making Processes

The process of decision making within a household has been conceptualised in marketing as a muddling through process (Park, 1982) and characterised by conflict avoidance (Spiro, 1983). It has been described in the economics literature as a rational process in which individuals attempt to maximise desired outcomes (Adamowicz et al., 2005), however, it is argued that the decision making process is *...anything but problem-centred rational analysis...* (Kirchler, 1999 p330). Indeed, as Kirchler (1999) suggests, it is perhaps the case that households only rationalise their decision making process in hindsight. In reality, they *need to make decisions continuously and face problems simultaneously rather than one after the other in a sequential order...* in this complex environment...*problems are part of and embedded in the routine of everyday life* and as such households don't have the time, energy or resources to face each decision in a rational manner (p330). Based on this description, it is reasonable to assume that strategies such as the use of “household norms” that simplify decision making in this environment, and limit the need for unnecessary expenditure of time energy and resources will be employed.

Within the household decision making literature there are references to the use of implicit, unspoken rules in the household that reflect the existence of household norms. For example, Kirchler (1999) refers to *implicit rather than explicit decision making...characterised by silent arrangements without verbal agreement* (p331). Similarly, when describing the first stage of the family decision making process, which they termed “configuration” Lee and Marshall (1998) referred to the “*rules of the game*” (p89). Additionally, Gronhoj (2006) reported that household members had discussed *appropriate* water use behaviours with their children and also the use of *interventions* if these behaviours were not upheld. The education of household members about appropriate behaviours and the enforcement of the behaviours reported in his study suggest the presence of norms of behaviour within the household/family unit. Despite this evidence that household norms are present, their existence as part of the household decision making process has not been explored.

As suggested above, this oversight may be in part based on the fact that much of the previous literature has focused on large decisions that are made infrequently, such as the purchase of a new home, a vacation, a new car, new appliances or furniture for the household (Davis and Rigaux 1974; Kirchler 1999; Martinez and Polo 1999; Belch and Willis 2001). Indeed, infrequent purchase decisions such as these are perhaps not conducive to the development of norms to guide behaviour. While, some studies have looked at more frequently purchase products such as cleaning products (Davis and Rigaux 1974), food (Martinez and Polo 1999) and sweets (Bodur et al 2002), none of these have focused on nor even discussed the use of household norms in the decision making process. As such, it seems that the literature remains undeveloped in this area, and as a result more research is required.

Methodology

To explore the use of norms in household decision making, it is necessary to examine decisions about frequently used products that are *embedded in the routine of everyday life* (Kirchler 1999, p330); that is, low involvement products. One such product is electricity: it is a ubiquitous product, used by virtually all households, and is consumed daily. These factors that suggest decisions about its usage may be governed in part by household norms.

This paper reports the findings of a series of nine focus groups conducted to explore how households make decisions to reduce electricity. Using scouts a sample of 76 participants was recruited in three locations (Bathurst, Port Macquarie and Wagga Wagga). In each location, three focus groups were conducted with different household types: 1) share houses/young couples with no children, 2) households with children, 3) empty nest / elderly households.

Of those that attended 63% were female, the ages of respondents ranged from 18-77 and respondents were from a variety of occupations and educational backgrounds. Each of the household types chosen were relatively evenly represented with 23 participants from share households/or young couples with no children, 24 participants from households with children and 29 participants were from empty nest household.

Household norms do exist

As a result of these focus groups it was found that household norms do exist and are employed as a part of household decision making processes in the context of electricity consumption and reduction. There were a number of factors that pointed to the existence of household norms, including rules about appropriate behaviours, and the enforcement of these behaviours.

Firstly, in the dialogue it became evident that household norms did exist as respondents discussed the presence of rules about acceptable/unacceptable behaviours in the household (in keeping with Feldman's (1984) definition shown earlier in this paper). For example:

1) The rule in our house you have a jumper on and if you are still cold then you put a blanket on and then you can turn the heater on. If you are having people over you can warm the house up (Share house),

2) My husband won't let me leave the TV on, like I don't turn it off with the remote, I have got to turn it off at the telly which I hate (Household with children)

3) We set our air conditioning to 22 degrees and consciously make sure we don't go up and again if we are cold then we put a jumper on (Empty nest household)

Each of these statements demonstrated that there were rules of behaviour that all members of the household were expected to abide by, suggesting that household norms (standards of acceptable behaviour) are present and are used to simplify household decision making. Each of the quotes above suggest the presence of a benchmark, which establishes appropriate courses of action in certain situations and therefore removes the need for household members to make a decision about what is or isn't appropriate.

Secondly, there were regular references to the enforcement of these rules / household norms, which also indicated the presence of household norms and their use to regulate electricity consumption. For example, respondents, referred to the use of sanctions for household members that did not behave in an acceptable manner. These sanctions encouraged members to alter their consumption behaviour. They included the removal of light bulbs, turning off the hot water and confronting other household members when they had failed to comply with accepted standards, as shown in the quotes below.

1) I get I trouble; she always yells down the house 'are there light fairies in the house?' Oh I have got to turn the lights off (Share house Female)

2) She is so passionate about it because I think her father whenever she left the light bulbs on when she was growing up, her Dad would take the light bulbs out so that she learnt really young that she had to turn the lights off (Share house female)

3) This farmer out at Turondale he used to talk about water consumption and stuff and when his kids came home from Sydney, when they first came home, he would turn the main (Electricity) off...they soon learnt they had to get out of the shower all covered in soap because he would time it..(Empty Nest Household)

These quotes also suggest that there is often one member of the household that takes the role of enforcing behaviours in households. This is consistent with the idea of an energy efficiency champion, as has previously been identified by Clancy and O'Loughlin (2002).

A third finding of interest is also evident in quote three above. That is that norms developed in a person's home of origin (family home), may be carried over into other households that they live in. This was consistent with Feldman's (1984) discussion of the development of group norms where he suggested that *norms are developed through carry over behaviours from past situations (p.52)*. Feldman (1984) suggested that in organisations people come into group situations with set expectations. Similarly in newly formed households, such as share houses, it was found that people came in with set expectations about acceptable behaviours (norms) in the household. However, this finding was not exclusive to share household, participants in all of the focus groups conducted referred to the fact that certain norms in their household were the result of norms that had developed in their home of origin.

I think people who have that (reducing electricity use through behaviour changes) in their background, because ...I think there is a section of society that copies what their parents did (Household with Children)

I grew up being fairly frugal, I was trained (Empty Nest Household)

The significance of this finding for marketers trying to influence long term behaviour change is that behaviours established at home are often carried on in the long term. Hence, programs that educate children and provide mechanisms for families to establish good habits with their children may be effective for establishing long term goals. In fact, the impact of some of these programs was already evident in the following quote.

My children, ... they're actually telling us how to be more efficient from the education that they're getting ... like coming home and saying 'Oh Mum we have got free bulbs and we have to get them because we need to save electricity' (Household with Children)

The role of critical incidents in developing household norms

As well as education, it is apparent that household norms develop based on past critical incidents. For example, the arrival of a larger than expected bill was often times recalled as a point when it was decided that action had to be taken to change behaviour in the household, ie what had been acceptable was no longer. That is a critical point when existing norms/ the status quo was assessed, re evaluated and perhaps changed. Another type of critical incident mentioned was seeing a program or receiving information that had particular resonance, such as Carbon Cops or An Inconvenient Truth.

We have bought a (new) house...our bill was about \$600 a quarter...just huge...we have definitely got to do something (Household with children)

It is usually after you have had a scare, like with a power bill or you see something on telly and that gives you a bit of a knee jerk reaction and you think you should go and do something (Household with children)

Share households use household norms differently to familial households.

A final finding is that household norms operate differently in different kinds of households. The application of household norms was more straightforward in familial households where there was legitimate power to enforce the accepted forms of behaviour. In contrast, decision making in share households was characterised by conflict avoidance and tolerance because of the absence of legitimate power. That is, household members would put up with behaviours that at times were unacceptable to maintain civility within the household. As one person commented, *it is frustrating at times, but I just put up with it (Share household female)*. This is consistent with Feldman's (1984) discussion of developing norms to facilitate the survival of the group. However, focus group findings indicated that at times the unacceptable behaviour would reach a point where household members would begin to sanction behaviours.

Conclusions

In this study we have sought to investigate the existence of household norms within households. They appear to exist in all household types, and not just those with children. These household norms are different to social norms, and are developed and enforced within households. It appears that for some people these household norms develop at a relatively early age, which indicates the importance of education programs. For others, critical incidents appear to be important for the development of household norms. However, not all household members willingly comply with household norms, and the meeting of these norms is encouraged, in the case of electricity, by energy champions. There are also differences in the use of household norms across household types, with household norms being more difficult to develop and enforce in share houses because of an absence of legitimate power. In further research the role of household norms as well as energy champions in reducing household electricity use will be examined.

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