Kathy Hamilton and Miriam Catterall

Consuming Love in Poor Families: Children’s Influence on Consumption Decisions

University of Strathclyde

Queen’s University, Belfast

This paper explores consumption practices in poor families focusing on children’s influence on consumption decisions. Based on in-depth interviews with 30 such families, the study demonstrates that children exert considerable direct and indirect influence on family consumption decisions and practices. Consumption in poor families often revolves around children and parents make considerable sacrifices to ensure their children are not stigmatised by the visibility of poverty. Indeed, some parents place their own needs and desires on hold until their children are older. The findings are discussed with reference to love influence in family consumer research.

Keywords: poverty, love, family, consumer decision-making, children

Introduction

The importance of family research has been recognised since Sheth (1974) highlighted the role of the family rather than the individual as the basic unit of consumption. Since then marketers and consumer researchers have become increasingly interested in family consumption behaviour. Traditionally studies in family consumer decision making focused on the husband-wife interaction (Menasco and Curry 1989; Burns 1992; Krampf, Burns and Rayman 1993; Webster 1994). More recent studies have acknowledged that children and adolescents also have an important role to play in the consumption activities of the family (Hall et al. 1995; Palan and Wilkes 1997; Ahuja, Capella and Taylor 1998). Shoham, Rose and Bakir (2004) report that children under 12 years old influence some $320 billion...
dollars worth of household products. However, this research stream has not placed enough emphasis on the plurality of family structures (Ekström 2004), for example, little is known about the consumption patterns of lone parent families (Ahuja, Capella and Taylor 1998). Additionally, studies have largely neglected the ways in which access to financial resources might impact on children’s influence on family consumption. The study reported here extends this area of research interest by focusing on both lone parent and two-parent poor families where consumption opportunities are restricted.

According to the US Census Bureau (2004), 12.7% of the population, some 37 million people, are said to be living in poverty. In the UK, the General Consumer Council (2001) estimate that between 13 and 14 million people live in poverty. Despite their prevalence, the poor and their consumption decisions are neglected in consumer research. Even in disciplines where poverty is a more vibrant research topic, analysis tends to focus on the financial circumstances of families or households and take little or no account of what goes on within these units, thus ignoring the distribution of expenditure within families (Millar and Glendinning 1992).

It might be expected that children’s influence in poor families would be low given the very limited opportunities for discretionary spending and previous research that shows that children tend to exert more influence in higher-income families (Jenkins 1979; Nelson 1979). Contrary to expectations, however, the study reported here shows that children in poor families exert considerable influence on family consumption to the extent that consumption is often organised around their needs. Importantly, the study also demonstrates the strength of love influence on consumption in poor families.

This article begins with a review of literature on intergenerational decision making in family consumer behaviour research. The methodology is then discussed, detailing the sampling, data collection and interpretation methods employed in the study. The findings are reported in relation to spending on goods that are consumed within the private sphere of the home as well as those that are visible in the public sphere, the world outside the home. The subsequent discussion considers the significance of love as a driver of children’s influence in consumer decision making. Finally, the implications of the findings for theory and research on family consumption are discussed.

**Intergenerational Family Influence in Consumer Decision Making**

Purchase decisions within the family are not always the outcome of individual choice, but rather, family members influence each other. Palan and Wilkes (1997) discuss how adolescents employ a range of influence strategies including bargaining strategies (such as money deals) and
Consuming Love in Poor Families

persuasion strategies (such as begging) to influence the outcome of family purchase decisions. As John (1999, p.200) suggests, children learn to become successful “influence agents” through sophisticated negotiation strategies. Sociologists, Daly and Leonard (2002) found that children in poor families employ a variety of strategies for getting what they want. These include persuasion tactics, normally through repeated entreaty, or linking their requests to providing help around the house. In some cases children resort to deviant behaviour to get what they want.

Some researchers have suggested that children’s influence in family decision making depends on product type. Mangleburg (1990) shows that children have significant influence in product decisions for which they are the final consumer, but have less influence for products that are used by the entire family. The influence of children has also been shown to vary inversely with the expense and importance of the product (Shoham, Rose and Bakir 2004; Foxman, Tansuhaj and Ekström 1989). However, John (1999) found that children not only influence purchase decisions relating to frequently purchased items, they may also influence family decision making in one-off, and even expensive, purchase decisions such as cars or holidays by initiating the purchase, collecting information about alternatives and suggesting retail outlets.

Rindfleisch and Burroughs (1996) suggest that the changing structure of the family may have implications for consumer research. However, Geuens, Mast and De Pelsmacker (2002) found that contemporary family structures, such as single parent families and smaller families, have only a minor impact on children’s influence on decision making. Other studies have highlighted the importance of family dynamics and communication patterns (Manglebug 1980; Foxman, Tansuhaj and Ekström 1989). More recently, Shoham, Rose and Bakir (2004) found that children of pluralistic parents seem to have more influence than children of laissez-faire parents for durable goods and more influence than protective parents for non-durables.

As well as children’s influence, research has considered parental influence through the socialisation of children (Moore, Wilkie and Lutz 2002; Cotte and Wood 2004). Ward (1974, p.2) defines consumer socialisation as “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace.” Moore, Wilkie and Lutz (2002) examine the power of intergenerational influence and suggest that the family is the most important socialisation agent. This is consistent with Cotte and Wood (2004) who conclude that parental influence is stronger than sibling influence on consumer innovativeness. Ward (1974) suggests two alternative explanations for the socialisation of children in poor families. First, children in poor families, who have less experience of money, may develop fewer consumer skills than children in higher-income families who have more
consumption opportunities. Second, children from poor families may become highly skilled consumers because of their experience with the use of scarce resources.

Finally, Park, Tansuhaj and Kolbe (1991) note that family research has given little attention to emotions including love, affection, sympathy, intimacy, anger and guilt in consumer behaviour. They point out that most studies of family decision making “assume decisions are made in a rational manner by choosing among alternative courses of action” yet “relationships between family members which create notions of hearth and home are centred on the deep-seated affection members have for one another” and “pervades all family decisions” (p.723). The findings from this study of poor families demonstrate the strength of love influence in family consumption decisions.

Methodology

Much of the debate in the poverty literature concerns how it should be defined and measured. The two main approaches to defining poverty are absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty occurs when people have insufficient resources to provide the minimum necessary for physical survival and, thus, is equated with extreme need such as starvation and destitution (Becker 1997). Previous consumer research studies have examined extreme need associated with homelessness (Hill and Stamey 1990; Hill 1991). Relative poverty occurs when people have insufficient resources to participate in the norms of their society and are thus deprived of a “happy life” through not taking “what life has to offer” (Bauman 1998, p.37). Although the sample in this study is drawn from families in less extreme forms of poverty than previous studies, respondents are poor in the sense that they have less than other members of society.

Purposeful sampling was used for this project, which involves samples being selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth (Patton 2002). In other words, purposeful sampling involved the selection of information-rich cases that are used to provide in-depth information that is relevant to the purpose of the research. Respondents came from urban areas of Northern Ireland and included both the unemployed and those working in low-paid jobs. Northern Ireland has higher poverty rates than both Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland and, consequently, has the highest level of income support claimants. One in every three children (37.4 per cent) lives in poverty (General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland 2006). Time sampling was also employed in that it was envisaged that certain times of the year would prove extremely difficult for poor consumers. The interviews began in March 2004 and continued until May 2005. As a result, they encompassed the summer
months when children are on school holidays and preparations for Christmas.

The study involved five two-parent families and twenty-five lone parent families (twenty-four headed by females). More lone parents were recruited for the study because lone parenthood is the main cause of family poverty with more than two-thirds (67 per cent) of lone parents in Northern Ireland living in poverty (General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland 2006). In line with the feminisation of poverty and the increasing attention placed on the plight of poor lone mothers (Hill and Stephens 1997), female-headed families account for the majority of this group. As Alwitt and Donley (1996, p.52) suggest, “Not only are families headed by women the dominant family type in the poverty population, they also are most deeply in poverty and have the highest poverty deficits.”

A market research agency with a strong social research portfolio was employed to recruit families for the study; to identify suitable respondents and schedule appointments for interviews. Although an expensive option, the main advantage of using the agency was that it employs recruiters who live in a wide range of very different urban and rural communities across Northern Ireland. Thus, recruiters were accessing families from their local communities, helping to create trust and a greater willingness to participate in the interviews on such a sensitive subject matter. It also meant that interviews were dispersed across communities rather than being clustered in one or two communities. The agency was provided with a detailed sampling plan to be used in recruitment. The recruitment specifications related to household structure and composition; single and dual parent households, single parent gender and that there should be at least one child under the age of 18 living in the family home. The Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain (1999) was used to determine the maximum income levels of the households selected. This survey identified that the income, after tax, needed each week to escape overall poverty averages at £239 for all households. Table 1 indicates that the majority of families in the study had incomes well below this figure.

In-depth interviews were held with thirty poor families. Both individual (16) and family (14) interviews were held. In the first instance the primary respondent in each household, defined as the person responsible for consumer decision making including sourcing and paying for goods and services, was interviewed. In other households it was possible to arrange an interview with multiple family members simultaneously. These family interviews included a partner and/or secondary school age children (aged 11 to 18). It was hoped that including multiple family members in the interviews would lead to the discovery of more insightful findings. Poverty is often experienced within the social context of the family and as such,
### Table 1: Respondent Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym (age)</th>
<th>Interview Type</th>
<th>Weekly Income</th>
<th>Family Details</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah (46), Martin (15), Ella (13) and Linda (11)</td>
<td>Mother, 1 son, 2 daughters</td>
<td>£160</td>
<td>Lone parent, 6 children (4 under 18)</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda (32), Ann (14), Lorna (12) and Gareth (11)</td>
<td>Mother, 2 daughters, 1 son</td>
<td>£169</td>
<td>Lone parent, 2 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip (48) and Joanne (16)</td>
<td>Father and daughter</td>
<td>£82</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe (43) and Jenny (16)</td>
<td>Mother and daughter</td>
<td>£99</td>
<td>Lone parent, 2 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna (39) and Paul (15)</td>
<td>Mother and son</td>
<td>£99</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet (38) and Pamela (16)</td>
<td>Mother and daughter</td>
<td>£198</td>
<td>Lone parent, 3 children</td>
<td>unemployed (illicit income)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria (38) and Ryan (17)</td>
<td>Mother and son</td>
<td>£160</td>
<td>Lone parent, 3 children</td>
<td>unemployed (illicit income)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorraine (43) and Lisa (14)</td>
<td>Mother and daughter</td>
<td>£107.50</td>
<td>Lone parent, 3 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine (40) and Samantha (15)</td>
<td>Mother and daughter</td>
<td>£146</td>
<td>Lone parent, 3 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca (23) and James (30)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>£185</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona (25) and Jason (28)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>£190</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Both unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin (29) and John (30)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>£200</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>John – chef Erin - unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jodie (42) and Daniel (43)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>£170</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Both unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise (43) and Barry (40)</td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>£190</td>
<td>2 parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Both unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica (38)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£200</td>
<td>Lone parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Manager of local women’s centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah (25)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£148</td>
<td>Lone parent, 3 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£170</td>
<td>Lone parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Part time waitress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma (36)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£190-£200</td>
<td>Lone parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Part time pharmacy assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda (36)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£135.30</td>
<td>Lone parent, 2 children</td>
<td>Unemployed – not fit for work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare (25)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£250</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Part time youth worker, part time student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
responses to poverty may be collaborative in nature. The interviewing of multiple family members can also permit a deeper understanding of the family dynamics in terms of each person’s role and influence in consumption decisions. Family methodologies have not been widely used in consumer research. Although research has focused on issues such as family decision making, these studies do not involve all family members in the data collection process. Some of these studies have used husband and wife couples to consider the role each plays in making consumption choices (Menasco and Curry 1989; Burns 1992; Krampf, Burns and Rayman 1993; Webster 1994). Others have examined the influence of children and adolescents in family decision making and familial influence in the socialisation process (Foxman, Tansuhaj and Ekström 1989; Beatty and Talpade 1994; Cotte and Wood 2004). Although these latter studies include multi-generational participants, family members were separated at the point of data collection through adolescent and parent questionnaires.

Obtaining multiple perspectives and observing the interaction between family members were effective methods of understanding the complexities of family life. However, in certain cases there were some inhibiting effects of interviewing family members as a group. The mutual self-disclosure required in family interviews may make some respondents feel uncomfortable and prevent open discussion of certain sensitive issues. There may also be a tendency for one family member to act as the main spokesperson. In this case, the researcher faces the additional challenge of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tammy (27)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£140</td>
<td>Lone parent, 2 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa (31)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£206</td>
<td>Lone parent, 5 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva (45)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£110.50</td>
<td>Lone parent, 3 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise (25)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£100</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£180</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>unemployed with voluntary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie (24)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£144</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>full time student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£110</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£140</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>Full time student, part-time bar work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice (23)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£110</td>
<td>Lone parent, 2 children</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma (19)</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>£100</td>
<td>Lone parent, 1 child</td>
<td>unemployed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
encouraging all respondents to participate. If one person acts as the speaker for the family, this creates a barrier to obtaining multiple perspectives.

Given the private and personal nature of the research, interviews were carried out in respondents’ homes to ensure a familiar and comfortable environment. Additionally, as researchers are “outsiders” to family life, this approach offers the added benefit of obtaining glimpses of the “inside” (Franklin 1996, p.253). This also helped to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere, enabling the free flow of communication. Children seemed to appreciate this setting, with some of the younger participants making use of various “props” throughout the interview, for example, one 14 year-old girl displayed clothing and shoes while talking about her consumption patterns. However, this home setting created a degree of vulnerability for the researcher due to the high crime environments where respondents lived (Hamilton, Downey and Catterall 2006). Interview topics included everyday life (e.g. evaluation of circumstances relative to other families and friends, feelings about shortage of money and its effect on children), budgetary strategies (e.g. management of the household budget, acquisition sites for goods and services), hopes for the future, family background information (e.g. employment status) and financial circumstances (e.g. sources of income, attitudes to credit). Respondents were given a financial reward at the end of the interview as a token of thanks.

Interview transcripts and notes taken by the researcher formed the foundation of analysis. Data analysis was not entirely separated from data collection and analysis began while interviewing was still under way. The overlapping of data collection and analysis is said to improve both the quality of the data collected and the quality of the analysis (Patton 2002). Hermeneutics was used to interpret the data. This is an iterative process, “in which a “part” of the qualitative data (or text) is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the developing sense of the “whole”” (Thompson, Pollio and Locander 1994, p.433). These iterations allow a holistic understanding to develop over time, as initial understandings are modified as new information emerges. This part-to-whole process involved two stages. First, each individual interview was interpreted. Secondly, separate interviews were related to each other and common patterns identified (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989).

An important tenet of hermeneutic philosophy is pre-understanding. Hermeneutics recognises that prior to interpretation, we and the object of our interpretation exist (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). In the hermeneutic tradition, preconceptions serve a purpose, in that they provide a necessary frame of reference from which more informed understandings of a given phenomenon can be developed (Gadamer 1976 cited in Thompson, Pollio and Locander 1994). In this study the continual movement between the
literature and the empirical work proved a helpful aid throughout the interpretation process.

**Findings: Children’s Influence on Family Consumption**

The findings are presented in terms of how children influence the family’s spending patterns in relation to public sphere consumption and private sphere consumption. Public sphere consumption refers to spending on goods that are visible to others in the world outside the home. Private sphere consumption refers to spending on goods that are consumed within the private sphere of the home that are not easily seen by people outside the family.

**Public Sphere Consumption**

Children in poor families can have substantial influence on the family’s consumption activities in relation to visible goods. One way that this is manifested is through the purchase of brand name clothing. Peer pressure and fear of social difference affected almost all the families in the study, highlighting a strong social pressure to conform. Teenagers can judge one another based on the brands they wear (Quart 2003) and children in poor families tend to believe that if someone is wearing expensive-looking brand names they could not be poor (Elliott and Leonard 2004). As such, many of the parents felt pressurised into ensuring that their children had access to socially acceptable clothing.

Jackie: *Actually nearly all his friends wear brand name shoes so I wouldn’t make my child stand out* (23, lone parent, one child).

Sarah: *If I buy them cheap stuff they won’t wear them, they’re only going to be laughed at in the street, you buy stuff for the kids so as they’re not going to be bullied.* (46, lone parent, six children – four under 18).

Lorraine: *It seems to be that it’s the done thing to dress your kids in brand name clothing, I have to do it now; she has reached that age. For years I avoided brand names, but I was never going to make her stand out from the rest of them* (43, lone parent, three children).

Some families were able to opt out of purchasing brand name clothing for their children if the children were too young to be aware of brand names and if there were no older siblings to highlight the issue. The purchase of brand name clothing represents parents’ attempts to protect children from the effects of potential stigmatisation such as bullying. In some family
interviews, teenagers admitted that their peers would tease them if they did not wear the “right” clothes. This encouraged parents to stretch resources to ensure that their children were not excluded from consumption activities available to their peers. The parents in the study were often very sceptical about the value of brand name clothing as this conflicted with the goal of careful budgeting and minimising unnecessary financial outgoings. However, the desire to please their children tended to override this scepticism. Given the financial constraints faced by the families, this demonstrates the strength of children’s influence. This issue appeared to be equally salient for lone parent and two-parent families. The desire to protect children ties in with the idea of being a good parent and lone parents as well as those from two-parent families were equally committed to ensuring that poverty did not lead to “poor” parenting skills. As many of the respondents were unemployed, much of their energy was directed into the parenting role. Kochuyt (2004) reported similar findings in his study of poor families in Belgium and suggests that, for the unemployed, being a caring parent provides an identity that is worthy of public esteem.

Some parents felt that peer pressure to wear the “right” clothing may be so strong as to encourage deviant behaviour in the form of criminal activity. Denise and Barry’s children (aged 16 and 17) provide a good illustration of this. Denise fears that her sons will turn to crime if their desires for brand name clothing are not satisfied, “you have to let them have it; you don’t want them out stealing.” Stretching financial resources to pay for such clothing as well as the worry of the alternative means that their sons may obtain this clothing places a strain on Denise and Barry. The children in this family place high demands on their parents in terms of the clothing they desire and if these demands are not met “they won’t go out.” Self-confinement to the home is used as a persuasion tactic by the children to encourage parents to meet their demands, resulting in the family’s coping efforts being placed under threat. Denise would prefer to allocate resources to areas that would benefit the household as a whole, “you’re paying £49 for a T-shirt, you could get a table and chairs for that, you know what I mean.”

The main reason for the emphasis placed on visible consumption of this kind is to avoid the stigma of poverty. However, the above example suggests that this is not the only reason for parents allocating scarce financial resources to brand name clothing. Arguably, this example could also be interpreted as a form of blackmail by the children in order to get what they want. Like love, blackmail plays on parents’ emotions and, therefore, offers further support for the need to challenge the idea of the rational consumer acting as an information processor in order to make optimal purchase decisions. Whether driven by love or blackmail, the outcome entails some degree of sacrifice from the parents.
Some adults in the study reported feelings and experiences of being judged negatively by others in their communities, such as neighbours and even extended family members.

Janice: *I know people do judge you, there are people who look down on you for what you wear and the way you talk, there are people who will look down on you for any reason* (23, lone mother, two children).

Negative judgements from others can impact on poor families’ self-image and, consequently, self-definition is influenced by perceived social definition. This echoes Goffman’s (1963, p.18) suggestion that shame can be a central possibility arising from the individual’s perception of falling short of “*what he really ought to be*.” For some parents, concealing the extent of their poverty becomes highly important.

Jodie: *People are under the impression that we have money but we don’t have money. But I let people think that, I don’t change their minds. If they think I’ve money let them think that. They don’t know that I’m sitting here many a night without a pint of milk, but that’s my business* (42, two-parent family, two children).

Hannah provides another example of this. At the time of interview she was unable to afford the materials to decorate her living room and, consequently, had no wallpaper or paint on her walls. Home decoration is something that is not readily visible to others and this means that the money she has can be allocated to impression management strategies. Hannah found this an important issue because she had more prosperous family members:

*I’ve nieces, all the same age as Becky (5 year old daughter) and they always get, they all have daddies who work and every other week they’d be getting toys out of the Disney Shop and trainers and Becky’s coming to me and saying “will you get me that?” and you do try your best, more or less I give into it* (25, lone parent, three children).

This extract also illustrates how lone parents may face additional pressure in comparison with dual parent families. The issue of sacrifices in the private domain is discussed further in the following section.

**Private Sphere Consumption**

The previous section demonstrated that poor families may allocate financial resources to maintaining public consumption, particularly in the form of brand name clothing. Due to the high price of such items, parents can be placed under financial stress. For example, although a majority of
respondents prefer to operate on a cash-only basis and avoid credit, some parents felt forced to turn towards credit in order to obtain brand name clothing:

Eva: *I have to shop from catalogues sometimes because you can pay it off. There’s times I just couldn’t go to the town and spend £30 or £40, I mean some of these Reeboks and all that Sarah [12 year old daughter] would want, I mean I couldn’t take £35 out of my money, I can’t do it* (45, lone parent, three children).

This has a knock on effect on resources that can be allocated to other areas and some families have to scrimp on necessities in order to cope with such extra pressures. As well as turning to credit, Eva commented that if she has to reduce expenditure, it is food that is the most flexible.

Eva: *You have to pay your bills; you can’t have no electric or no heating. You’d have to cut back, maybe instead of having a full dinner, you’d have maybe beans and toast or egg and chips instead of egg sausage and chips.*

Structuring family consumption around children was also in evident in this study. To illustrate, several parents organise their own diet around their children’s preferences with comments such as “*I tend to buy what they eat and I would sort of skimp on my own stuff*” and “*I eat kids’ food, I don’t eat adult’s food, I just eat what they’re eating.*” Financial resources are therefore directed primarily to children. As one lone mother described, this situation is found with money allocated to clothing, “*he [2 year-old son] gets a lot of my shopping money, he gets a lot of clothes. I can’t afford to buy clothes for me and him.*” Previous consumer research suggests that children influence the consumption choices of products for which they are the end user such as toys and breakfast cereal (Lackman and Lanasa 1993). This study demonstrates how limited financial resources may increase children’s influence. These poor children are at the centre of the consumption decision making within the family, not only in relation to products that are used by them, but also in relation to products for other family members.

The allocation of scarce resources around children’s needs means that many poor parents have little or no scope for flexibility in budgeting for their personal consumption. Some parents reported a reliance on the second hand market for sourcing clothing for themselves and most parents had few opportunities for socialising. Many parents in the study suppressed their own needs to provide for their children. Indeed, some parents even implied that their lives were on hold as all their energy was aimed at caring for their children. Rebecca (two parent family, two children) provided a good description of this saying that “*when the kids grow up, you know a good bit, [I’ll]*
go back to work, buy my own house and have my life back again.” This form of
dreaming or fantasising about the future was one of the few occasions that
the parents in the study demonstrated future-thinking. Future dreams
centred on buying a house and getting a job and even, on one occasion,
moving abroad for a better life. However, further questioning revealed that
little consideration or planning focused on how these dreams would be
achieved. Rather, parents assumed that their financial position would
improve when their children were older. The general tendency of parents in
this study was to adopt a short-term orientation. This is illustrated in the
following comment by Philip:

   It’s a day to day existence at the minute, it really is, I’ve come to the attitude now
   that you let tomorrow worry about itself because you can’t do anything about
tomorrow. It’s the only way you’re going to sleep or you just end up in the
depths of depression and it’s not good (48, lone parent, one child)

Kochuyt (2004) discusses how exclusion within the marketplace can be
countered by the inclusive effects of the family unit which is made into a
back-up institution to fill the gaps created by the failures of the market and
the insufficient safety nets of the welfare state. The subordination of
individual needs to family needs is evident in the ways that parents suppress
their own needs and prioritise their children’s needs and wants. As Kochuyt
(2004, p.145) suggests “By imposing an ‘artificial lack’ of resources upon
themselves, the parents create an ‘artificial affluence’ for their kids.” As a result,
the ways in which resources are distributed within the family can create
affluence amidst poverty. This reiterates Goffman’s (1963, p.46) suggestion
that a family can have a high capacity to “constitute itself a protective capsule
for its young.”

Indeed, the adults in this study took their role as parents very seriously.
Motherhood can be an important reflection of one’s identity (Curasi, Hogg
and Maclaran 2004). The majority of mothers were unemployed, and as
such, much of their energy was devoted to the role of motherhood.

Julie: My lifestyle is very very budgeted, very sacrificing. It can be quite
stressful, sometimes I would go to bed and just think, oh my God, how did you get
through all that, it amazes me how I can find the money to pay for some of the
bills that I have, Holly’s [5 year-old daughter] school bills and stuff because she
wants to be involved in loads of stuff for her school which costs a fortune like. It
amazes me how I get the stuff that I get (24, lone parent, one child).

Rebecca: I like my kids to have the best, well, you know what I mean, you try and
make your kids have nice stuff (23, two-parent family, two children).
Of course, fathers as well as mothers can see the parenting role as important to their identity (Kochuyt 2004). Nevertheless, in this study evidence of self-sacrifice was stronger amongst mothers. While mothers tend to reduce their personal consumption and purchase their clothing in discount stores, two of the fathers in the study admitted to purchasing more expensive clothing. Daniel stated that he likes Levis jeans and Kickers shoes and was also wearing a Ben Sherman shirt throughout the interview while John admitted that he would happily pay £60 for a shirt. However, given that this was only evident in two cases, it cannot be generalised.

**Discussion: Consuming Love in Poor Families**

Poor families may prioritise the consumption of visible, public goods, such as brand name clothing, over the invisible, private goods, such as food and other goods consumed in the home. Although the societal definition of a necessity is no longer restricted to basic material needs (Gordon et al. 2000), such budgeting strategies need some explanation. Indeed, given their restricted budgets, poor families’ priorities may appear irrational to outsiders (i.e. those who have never experienced life on a low income), because money is allocated to products deemed as unnecessary while expenditure on basic needs is reduced (Firat and Dholakia 1998). However, the findings highlighted that love for their children is the main motivating factor influencing purchasing within poor families. Parents place much emphasis on avoiding the stigma associated with poverty and as such, the display of consumer goods becomes an important coping strategy for poor families.

Whilst sacrifice, love and striving for a level of decency for one’s children is surely admirable, curtailing spending on basic necessities, such as food, in order to buy a child the latest Football top or the latest version of Nike trainers appears to be excessive. One explanation for this quest for instant gratification may relate to control. Pavia and Mason (2004) found that material goods and experiences can be an important coping strategy for consumers who face uncertainty regarding their future. One of the conclusions of Pavia and Mason’s (2004) study on breast cancer sufferers was that they control consumption decisions to compensate for a lack of control in other areas of their life. Previous consumer research has also highlighted that poor consumers may encounter feelings of lost control (Hill and Stephens 1997). In this study, one of the reasons for the willingness to allocate expenditure to non-necessities, such as expensive clothing, is because the future looks bleak and uncertain. Indeed many respondents could see few short or medium term prospects for an improvement in lifestyle and an escape from poverty. Poor families may feel that they cannot control the future but they can control expenditure in the here and now.
This study raises some interesting issues on love and consumer decision making in the context of the time horizons of these families. The majority of respondents approached consumer decision making with short-term time horizons. The emphasis was placed on managing the here and now and respondents explained how they lived from week to week, and even day to day. The only exceptions to this were two lone mothers who were university students with detailed plans for long-term careers. Previous research suggests that lack of forward planning may be associated with an uncertain future. Henry (2005) found social class differences in terms of interest in future planning in that young professionals, who see the future as an opportunity, engage in detailed budgeting and view current investments as a contributing factor to future success. Conversely, the young working class, who view the future as a threat focus mainly on the short term, engage in limited budget planning and make use of fewer investment opportunities.

The short term perspective adopted by poor consumers implies that they may be unaware of the irrationality of their decisions. Evidence suggests that this short term orientation adopted by poor consumers may be a cross-cultural phenomenon. Belk (1999) investigated the seemingly irrational expenditure and at times prioritisation of luxuries over necessities amongst poor consumers in Third World countries, suggesting this may be due to feelings of deservingness because of prior deprivation or a desire for respectability. Alternatively, such spending patterns could be due to poor consumer skills. For example, consumers in Northern Ireland lack the skills to be able to put things right. General Consumer Council (2004) research confirms that only 41 percent of consumers in Northern Ireland consider themselves to be well informed about their consumer rights. This compares badly with Great Britain where the corresponding figure is 70 percent.

This study offers several points of contribution to research on love in the consumption context. Hill (2002) suggests that many marketing and consumer behaviour researchers have overlooked or ignored the impact of love resources for supporting and furthering the consumption adequacy of impoverished consumers. Previous research has discussed how children’s influence can stem from overt influence attempts such as bargaining or repeated entreaty aimed at persuading parents to meet their consumption desires (Palan and Wilkes 1997; Daly and Leonard 2002). This study demonstrates that the process of poor children’s influence does not necessarily result from overt direct persuasion strategies, but from love. Love for children motivates parents to place their own needs on hold and even encourages them to act in ways that go against the coping strategy of minimising expenditure. Importantly, this demonstrates why an emphasis on rational consumer decision-making neglects the emotions of love, sacrifice, altruism and even blackmail that have become apparent in this
Although Belk and Coon (1993, p.413) examine agapic love in the context of romantic love and gift giving, it may also apply to “brotherly love, spiritual love, and parental or familial love” and to non-gift purchases. This study considers agapic love in the form of parental or familial love. Belk and Coon (1993) discuss the differences between the agapic love paradigm and the exchange paradigm. Gifts within the exchange paradigm may be viewed as instrumental goal-orientated acts; however in the agapic love paradigm, expressive considerations are of central importance. Agapic love means that the giver is willing to make sacrifices and do anything for the recipient. Findings in this study demonstrate how this may be the case in poor families as parents prioritise the needs and wants of their children. Indeed, some parents suggest that their lives are on hold until their children are older. This is an altruistic style of love. As Hill (2002) suggests, altruism dominates if the principle love is to increase the welfare of others.

Belk and Coon (1993) suggest that money is irrelevant in the agapic love model of gift exchange as gifts of love should be given with little thought to the cost. However, in poor families, this disregard for money is not possible. As Daly (2005) suggests, money is the lens through which poor families live their lives. Money is at the core of every household decision. Nevertheless, despite concern with the cost, it cannot be denied that the parental love exhibited by poor parents is agapic and unselfish. This suggests that economic and love motives for consumption are not mutually exclusive but may occur simultaneously. In the case of poor families, economic concerns surrounding the cost of gifts for children should not mean that the love motive is any less significant.

Additionally, while Belk and Coon (1993) place rational and emotional factors in competing paradigms, findings suggest that both rationality and emotionality can coexist in the consumption activities of poor families. Parents in poor families have to plan expenditure, often involving careful allocation of resources. However, rather than viewing this rational planning behaviour as dispassionate, it should be seen as an expression of love that ensures the family’s needs are met. Thompson (1996, p.403) found a similar situation in relation to working mothers whose controlled shopping behaviour is evidence of their care and ability to “juggle” competing resources. Again, this suggests that consumption can be driven by competing motives.

**Conclusion**

This paper explores the consumption experiences of poor families who face significant restrictions in consumption opportunities. Findings demonstrate
that the children in these families are very influential in the family’s consumption activities as parents use consumption to reduce the visibility of their poverty. One of the overriding aims of this is the protection of children in terms of potential stigmatisation or social difference from peers.

Contributions from this research are evident on a number of levels. First, findings contribute to knowledge of poor families, especially in relation to coping with stigma and family decision making. Secondly, findings contribute to knowledge of children’s influence within the family by extending previous research to consider children’s influence in families with restricted budgets. The extent and power of children’s influence is highlighted and it is demonstrated how children’s influence can function in a variety of ways; children not only directly influence the family’s consumption activities but they also have an indirect influence that is motivated by love.

Previous studies in consumer research have had a predominant focus on individual behaviour and the plurality of family structures has not been greatly recognised (Ekström 2004). This study provides an example of how a family methodology can offer an insightful approach to consumer research. In order to use the family as a unit of analysis, this study involved in-depth family interviews where at least two family members were interviewed as a group. Consumption decisions can be spread throughout the family and it is therefore important to obtain multiple perspectives. As sociological family researchers have noted, no one person speaks for the family (Handel 1996). The family is a major consuming unit and findings demonstrate that familial influence has a large impact on consumption behaviour. The significance of collective consumption demonstrates the importance of using the family as a unit of analysis.

There is much potential for future research in this area. To illustrate, the public/private consumer goods divide may not be confined to poor families. Future studies could investigate whether there is evidence of this same division within all families. Additionally future studies could focus more on the emotions associated with consumer decision making, for example, studies on how blackmail, guilt, empathy and affection as well as love influence purchase behaviour in families.

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About the Authors

Kathy Hamilton is a Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Her research interests lie in consumer behaviour research particularly in relation to consumer disadvantage (low-income consumers, poverty and social exclusion) consumer agency and family consumption.

Miriam Catterall is a Senior Lecturer in Management at the Queen's University of Belfast where she is responsible for marketing and research methods programmes. She has considerable business experience in the market research industry and in management consulting. Her research interests lie in consumer research, especially consumer disadvantage, and feminist issues in marketing.