



Transforming beyond self: Fluidity of parent identity in family decision-making



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ABSTRACT

When a household welcomes a new infant a transformation occurs whereby household routines, values and decisions change. This research explores how decision-making is influenced by fluctuating identity subjectivities. We explore longitudinally, using a family identity framework, how the transitioning between self, couple and family self-identities influences the decisions made regarding social issues, in this case infant feeding. Results indicate that decision-making during a period of transformation is not straightforward, relying on a multiplicity of identities that are constantly renegotiated and dependent on other influences. Decisions made conform to the identity-construct-of-the-moment, but are fluid and subject to change, such that pinpointing causal pathways is inappropriate. Implications for influencing the consumption of social behaviors for consumer researchers are one size does not fit all and require an in-depth understanding of the fluidity of decision-making. Consequently, social marketing strategies need to be tailored to constructed identities and flexible across time to remain influential.

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1. Introduction

Welcoming a new infant into the household and becoming a family is a vitally important life event that is likely to influence the decision-making process for the new infant. Governments and other organizations frequently neglect solutions to social issues that consider the needs and desires around collectives such as families (French, 2009). In the social marketing literature most theories and solutions focus on the individual (Fleury & Lee, 2006). Behaviors such as alcohol consumption, smoking, eating and household waste recycling are typically examined from an individualistic perspective, thus ignoring the critical influence of the people surrounding the individual (French, 2009). Shifting to thinking about families in social issue decision-making may assist in reframing conventional wisdom about the best way to influence social issue decision-making.

A family is a collective enterprise central to many consumption experiences and filled with challenges in contemporary society (Epp & Price, 2008). As families go about constructing identity they face competing demands and beliefs, and increasingly fluid interpersonal relationships. Previous research has generally neglected the complex interplay between individual, relational and family identity

bundles (Cotte & Wood, 2004). Epp and Price (2008) argue that predominant theories of family consumption do not permit an explanation of how or when a family-level identity practice gets displaced by a relational identity practice. Thus, a major limitation of current family decision-making theory is that these theories do not accommodate the flux of identities over time in and out of social spaces that potentially influence decision-making, particularly when important life events such as childbirth occur. Studying consumption practices when significant life events occur can facilitate the discovery of themes that might be missed in a study of more ordinary events (Schouten, 1991). A particularly salient life event in consumers' lives, the birth of a child, was chosen for this study. When a child is introduced into a family the child's parents undergo a transformation beyond self; they transition from an individual into a parent and this is likely to influence their decision-making.

To address the limitations in current family decision-making theory the purpose of this study is to explore the interactions between identity bundles across time using the family framework of identity interplay (Epp & Price, 2008), and to understand the influence of these bundles on decision-making for the social marketing behavior of infant feeding. This paper commences with a discussion on the background and theoretical foundations. The research methods are then outlined, followed by a presentation of the results. The emergent themes are then interpreted and integrated into a discussion of identity transformation and its fluidity across time. The paper concludes with recommendations for theoretical development and managerial approaches based on the research findings.

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2. Infant feeding: An important issue in social marketing

Social marketing has been shown to be effective for a range of social issues, such as healthy eating, tobacco cessation, reducing alcohol consumption levels and recycling household waste (French, 2009; Lefebvre, 2010). Social marketing is a sub-discipline of marketing which seeks to address social issues using commercial marketing principles (Dann, 2010; French, 2009). The purpose of social marketing is the adoption and maintenance of positive social behaviors which provide long-term benefits to individuals and society (Andreasen, 2002).

Increasing the rate of breastfeeding globally is a key objective of the World Health Organization (WHO) (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2011) and is an example of a focal behavior of social marketers worldwide. Research constantly reaffirms evidence for the value of breastfeeding to the health of infants, children and women. Breastfeeding is linked to decreased rates of infant mortality, childhood illnesses, childhood obesity and chronic diseases in later life (Strong, 2012; World Health Organisation [WHO], 2013). The benefits of breastfeeding to mothers should also not be undervalued, such as reduced incidence of hypertension, reduced risk of heart disease and diabetes (Stuebe & Schwarz, 2010). Currently, few countries (if any) meet WHO's recommended exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continuation of breastmilk for at least two years, in conjunction with appropriate first foods (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2011). Countries such as the United States (US) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014), the United Kingdom (UK) (McAndrew et al., 2012) and Australia (AIHW, 2011) fall well below WHO's (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2011) recommendations, with exclusive breastfeeding rates up to six months between one and 15% across all social classes. While not being able to breastfeed is frequently cited as the reason many women stop breastfeeding, less than 12% actually cannot breastfeed because of health reasons or lack of milk production (Neifert, 2001; Stuebe et al., 2014). These low breastfeeding rates represent a significant health issue for society in general, as breastfeeding benefits not only the child and mother but also the broader community (Renfrew et al., 2012). The potential savings for governments if breastfeeding rates increase are also significant and could potentially save billions of dollars in health care for countries such as Australia, the UK and US (Renfrew et al., 2012; Smith, 2013). Thus, these static breastfeeding rates in Western cultures are problematic for governments and communities at large. Critically important for the design of social marketing programs to address the social issue of static breastfeeding rates is understanding how parents engage in infant feeding choices, how they construct their identity in making these decisions and to identify their relationship to more distal social forces and competing agents that influence these decisions.

Historically, in many cultures social rules entrust the responsibility for the care of infants to women (Woodward, 1997), with financial resourcing required to support the family being the responsibility of the male head of the household (Badinter, 1980). However, over the past three decades the role structure of couples and families in Western cultures has changed, with more women remaining in the workforce after they become mothers (Brough et al., 2008; Polach, 2003). Previous breastfeeding research has focused on the individual, primarily on the mother (e.g. Oakley et al., 2013; Quigley, 2013) and more recently the importance of the father's role has been recognized (e.g. Hunter, & Cattelona, 2014; Sherriff, Pantone, & Hall, 2014). However, there has been limited research on parents as joint decision-makers for behaviors involving children such as breastfeeding. Moving beyond individual approaches and including both parents in the decision-making process when developing theory for social marketing programs is now required. An in-depth understanding of the decision-making process used by families is necessary to bridge the gap between individual and family decision-making to assist social marketing managers to develop strategies aimed at assisting parents to adopt desired health behaviors.

3. Literature background

3.1. Family decision-making

Family decision-making theory emerged in the 1970s after recognition that purchasing decisions were often made by more than one person and that individual decision-making theory was overly simplistic (Sheth, 1974). Joint decision-making introduces the concept of the family as a collective enterprise and it is this collectivity with its accompanying challenges that predominate within contemporary society (Epp & Price, 2008). Over time, family identity is constructed within the context of competing demands and interests, increasingly discretionary and changing relationships and various family forms that depart from prevailing ideals. Epp and Price (2008) argue that these family identity packages are entrenched in the normalcy of everyday life and within the dominant social and cultural discourses of *self* and *family*. Family and family-consumer researchers, however, have generally neglected the complex interplay of individual, relational and collective identity practices and how these impact on decision-making.

Limitations exist in current family theory, including research questions and methods in the domain of family consumption which lack consideration of truly collective activities. Rather, family consumer research has been dominated by a concern with how individuals influence and organize family consumption, generally emphasizing how individuals negotiate outcomes within a family (Commuri & Gentry, 2000), how they characterize family as a facet of their extended selves (Tian & Belk, 2005), how an individual's personality traits influence decision-making (Ruth & Commuri, 1998), and how an individual's status in a family influences decision-making (Burns, 1992). Other studies have also investigated factors such as gender (Burns, 1992; Lee & Collins, 2000; Ruth & Commuri, 1998), social class (Ruth & Commuri, 1998), peer group influences, ethnic background, and prior family orientations (Lee & Collins, 2000) as determinants of variety in family decision-making. Previous research indicates family decision-making is a complex process (Lee & Collins, 2000), and in the extant body of family decision-making research important gaps exist in our understanding of family and social environment influence (Cotte & Wood, 2004).

This narrow focus on individuals within families drives decisions by firms, governments and other agencies about positioning strategies and the target audience based upon individual member's decision roles and relative influence in households (Commuri & Gentry, 2000). This view focuses on the importance of self, which in Western culture is potentially appropriate with the ascendancy of *I* but not so useful for collective cultures where the *we* is ascendant. However, this narrow construction fails to take into consideration that families face a variety of possible identities, including collective, relational and individual, that affect decision-making and impact on the collective. Consequently, firms, governments and other agencies may gain more value from positioning and targeting based on the idea that some products, and the services and brands associated with these products, act as resources for achieving relational and family identity goals. Thus, the individual is still important but only as it relates to the construction the collective identity.

Family decision-making research in general is static in nature, and does not consider repetitive family decisions which occur over a period of time (e.g. Lee & Collins, 2000) such as infant feeding. This limitation is similar to that found by Dagger and Sweeney (2007), who contend a static approach is limited in terms of its application to continually provided services, for which the service experience occurs through multiple consumption episodes and customers are likely to update their perceptions over the duration of the experience. To understand the complexities present in family decision-making Epp and Price (2008) proposed a family identity framework of identity interplay. This framework allows consumer researchers to understand how families engage in consumption activities to manage their identities, accommodate the ebb and flow of individual and relational units, and/or explain the dynamic interplay of individual and relational identities that interact in

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