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Lancaster University Management School
Working Paper
2007/030

**Power and influence in family decision-making: child
focussed perspectives from 21st century families**

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Child Focussed Perspectives From 21st Century Families**

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And

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Abstract

In response to the call for family research which (a) acknowledges that alternative forms of families exist, moving away from the predominance of nuclear conventions (Commuri and Gentry, 2000), (b) extends the restrictive nature of the participants recruited in family studies (Ekström, Tansuhaj and Foxman, 1987) and (c) focuses on more than one specific aspect of the family unit at a disaggregate level (Bazerman, 2001) this paper attempts to offer a more holistic view and complete account of how power and influence are exerted in family decision-making. We study the family decision making processes in six different families through a series of in-depth interviews, focussing specifically on how the children in each family try to get their voices heard and how they attempt to exert influence within their families. Themes such as gatekeeping, family microenvironments, intragenerational influence and individual/collaborative influence attempts emerge as ways through which individuals seek to restrict the power of others whilst maintaining or enhancing their own power levels in family decision-making.

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Introduction

In 2005 there were 17.1 million families in the United Kingdom¹. Given that in 2003 two fifths of all marriages in the United Kingdom were remarriages, in 2004 42 per cent of all births occurred outside marriage, in 2005 the General Household Survey reported that 10 per cent of all families with children were stepfamilies and that in Spring 2005 nearly one in four children lived in a lone parent family² a significant proportion of these families do not conform to nuclear notions. However, much consumer behaviour research conducted at the family level still continues to cling to nuclear conventions.

The theory of the nuclear family (Murdock, 1949) argues that all families derive from a basic structural group, in which a married couple (engaging in a socially approved sexual relationship) raise their biological children; the husband and father of the family is the sole breadwinner whilst the wife and mother remains within the home to rear children. However, at the start of the twenty-first century such nuclear models of familial arrangement are outdated, and indeed it is questionable whether or not such ideals and forms were ever really so prevalent (Crow, 2002; Stacey, 1993). Rather, the impact of factors such as an increased number of women entering the workplace, the rise in divorce rates, falling marriage rates, the rise in single parenting, the frequency of cohabitation without marriage (Clulow, 1993) and the individualization thesis (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) means no single British family form exists (Laslett, 1982).

Consumer research needs to keep pace with the changes occurring in family forms and decision making and this paper aims to address the call for further research which (a) acknowledges that alternative forms of families exist, moving away from the predominance of nuclear conventions (Commuri and Gentry, 2000), (b) extends the restrictive nature of the participants recruited in family studies (Ekström, Tansuhaj and Foxman, 1987) and, (c) focuses on a specific aspect of the family unit at a disaggregate level (Bazerman, 2001). Specifically, this paper explores (1) the changing nature of

¹ ONS (2006) Social Trends. No.36 (2006 Edition)

² ONS (2006) Social Trends. No.36 (2006 Edition)

twenty first century families, (2) the influence tactics of children alone and with their siblings, (3) intragenerational influence and (4) the role of different types of power in mediating family interactions. In this paper we review the literature on family decision-making, describe our phenomenologically-based approach using in-depth interviews, interpret the findings from our study of six families under four themes linked to power and influence, and conclude by presenting an initial mapping of the key components of family consumption dynamics (Figure 1).

Consumer Behaviour And Family Research

Much of the existing family research is not reflective of current, twenty-first century family decision-making (Lackman and Lanasa, 1993; Belch and Willis, 2001). The family as the unit of analysis has been relatively neglected by recent consumer research (Commuri and Gentry, 2000; Beatty and Talpade, 1994), with Burns (1993) highlighting the lack of research into the family unit, which means that many nuances surrounding family decision-making in the consumption context may have been overlooked. What little research that has been conducted on the family and family decision-making has often had a very restricted focus, e.g. concentrating on traditional two parent / nuclear families or dealing with families characterised as having a “normal” family structure (Sheth, 1974).

Early family studies also focussed on specific areas in which products were deemed to be husband or wife dominant. This sex-based role structure allowed researchers to identify *gendered*³ product provinces, with husbands having most control and influence over decisions relating to the choice of cars (Belch et al., 1985; Mohan, 1995), television sets (Belch et al., 1985; Mohan, 1995), lawn mowers (Mohan, 1995), life and other insurance (Davis and Rigaux, 1974), and gardening equipment and home repairs (Wolgast, 1958). Wives were found to dominate the choice of household appliances (Mohan, 1995; Wolgast, 1958), furniture and breakfast cereals (Belch et al., 1985), clothing (Mohan, 1995; Davis and Rigaux, 1974), food and non-alcoholic beverages, and household cleaning products (Davis and Rigaux, 1974). Such early research has been criticised for failing to account for the role other family members (most notably children) might play in

³ We are reporting earlier research which tended to use sex and gender interchangeably, largely without regard to subsequent debates (highlighted by feminism) that sought to differentiate sex and gender.

influencing decisions. This criticism led Davis (1976, p246) to claim that 'it is a serious oversimplification to talk about a product category as simply husband dominant, wife dominant or both.' Recognising that family decision-making is a joint process (Davis, 1976; Burns, 1992; Shepherd and Woodruff, 1988) there have been calls for further family studies which collect data from a wider range of family members (Ekström, Tansuhaj and Foxman, 1987).

The role children play in influencing family decisions has also been largely ignored within consumer research (Commuri and Gentry, 2000; Foxman and Tansuhaj, 1988). The studies that have included children have usually relied on data relating to their parents' perceptions of the amount of influence the child exerted (see for instance Belch and Willis, 2001; Filiatrault and Ritchie, 1980) rather than talking to children themselves. There have been increasing calls for research to include children's voices in family studies (Lackman and Lanasa, 1993; Commuri and Gentry, 2000). More recent studies have included children, but often only involved one child per family (Geuens, Mast and Pelsmacker, 2002; Holdert and Antonides, 1997) – to the neglect of families with two or more children. Similarly the possibility of intragenerational influence, where siblings influence one another, has not been fully explored (Cotte and Wood, 2004).

Existing studies of the influence of children on family decision-making often fail to provide a consistent view as to what influence consists of (Mangleburg, 1990; Johnson et al., 1994) or how it should be measured. Such discrepancies amongst studies has fuelled calls for research which shifts the focus from measuring influence to documenting how influence is conveyed, favouring ethnographic methods (Commuri and Gentry, 2000). Many problems exist in defining influence, with terms such as 'influence', 'power', and 'control' often being used interchangeably (Schwarzwald and Koslowsky, 1999; Olson and Cromwell, 1975), which make comparisons across studies problematic (Kipnis, 1976). Influence has been closely linked to power, recognising the dyadic relationship between the two concepts: 'influence is kinetic power, just as power is potential influence' (French and Raven 1959, p152).

The influence of children is dependent upon a range of antecedent variables, including styles of parental socialization (Carlson and Grossbart 1988) and of family communication (McLeod and Chaffee 1972). Such antecedent variables assume that

each child within a given family will be treated in a similar way and that experiences of family life will be homogeneous for all children in a family. Our paper specifically focuses on children and how they, individually or as a collective, influence their parents or guardians (or indeed each other) within a range of twenty first century family forms.

Methodology

Phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989) were conducted with families living in the north west of England. As many family members as possible were involved in the data collection process. As in many interpretivist consumer research studies (see for instance Thompson and Troester, 2002) purposive sampling (Patton, 1990; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was used in which a range of twenty first century family forms were recruited, as table 1 shows. The families included a lesbian headed family with both adopted and biological children, a family headed by a cohabiting couple, a family headed by a single mother, a blended family⁴ and two nuclear families.

Table 1: Summary of Families Recruited

<i>Family Name⁵</i>	<i>Family Type</i>	<i>Family Members</i>	<i>Times Met/Period</i>
Baldwin	Blended	Colin, Sharon (Parents); Roz (13), Chloe (6)	5 / 12 months
Jones	Cohabiting	Debbie, Paul (Parents); Michael (14), Anna (12), Chris (9), Tina (7)	5 / 11 months
Francis/Akua	Lesbian/Adopted	Fante, Barbara (Parents); Kwame(19), Helen (17), Ashanti (5), Kaya (3)	3 / 4 months

⁴ A blended family has been described by Belch and Willis (2001) as a step family

⁵ Pseudonyms have been used

White	Nuclear	Claire, Richard (Parents); Robert (12), Lee (10), Kevin (10)	4 / 6 months
Bright	Nuclear	Pat, Tom (Parents); Zara (11), Jack (9)	3 / 6 months
Harrison	Single Parent	Natalie (Parent); Mark (21), David (18), Luke (13)	3 / 6 months

Interviews were largely conducted in the family home, usually in the kitchen at the dining table, although one interview was conducted at one respondent's place of work. Each family was interviewed between three and five times over periods ranging from four to twelve months. Respondents were first asked for their consent to participate in the research process, assured of anonymity, told about the purpose of the research and then asked for permission to record the conversations. Consent was sought from parents and guardians to approach children in order to then seek the children's consent to be involved in the data collection process (Mandell, 1991). Methods by which valid consent can be obtained from children were adhered to (Mason, 2004). Recognising that children are potentially vulnerable research participants (Morrow and Richards, 1996) they were interviewed within the family home where an adult was always present.

Interviews were tape recorded in full, lasted between 60 and 130 minutes, and all were transcribed verbatim. Interviews were carried out with individuals and with groups of family respondents as they made themselves available; both children and their parents or guardians were interviewed to gain a sense of the interplay of behaviours between family members. Interviews were semi-structured and explored themes such as family history and how family members got their own way. A semi participatory researcher role was adopted with the children (Mandell, 1991) in which differences between adults and children are accepted, but which recognises that although children may have different competencies to their adult counterparts, their competencies are not necessarily inferior.

The interpretation of the interview texts was undertaken using a hermeneutical process (Thompson, 1991; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1990) which involved an iterative process of moving back and forth between interview texts (within and across family cases) and the literature. Emerging themes in the data drove subsequent reading in the literature (Thompson, 1996). Following hermeneutical principles (at the methodological level) a constant shift when reading between individual transcripts and the entire data set enabled a greater emergent understanding to develop in which elements of the part gave further meaning to the whole. Each family case was analysed on an idiographic basis which allowed for categorization of data from which larger conceptual classes emerged. These concepts were then compared across family cases, following Spiggle's (1994) initial steps for qualitative data analysis.

Emergent Themes

We draw on extracts from the stories of our six families to illustrate the changing understanding of 'the family', before moving to discuss four emergent themes around power and influence from our dataset: gatekeeping behaviour; intragenerational influence; microenvironments; and individual and collaborative influence attempts.

Changing understanding of the family: The families' stories highlight the changing nature of familial arrangements, supporting Stacey's (1991) claim that families can be formed not merely through blood and marital ties, but also through networks of close relationships. This was particularly apparent for both the lesbian and the single parent families. Barbara Akua and Fante Francis, a lesbian couple who have lived together for over ten years and who have two adopted daughters, Ashanti (5) and Kaya (3), (Barbara also has two older children, Helen (17) and Kwame (19), from a previous heterosexual relationship) discussed an alternative non-blood related family they have chosen, as Barbara comments: 'I suppose because we're not a typical family there are other people who I would class as family who aren't necessarily related to me by blood. Who we've known for a very long time and who are in some cases closer to us than actual birth family'.

Barbara's comments were echoed by Natalie Harrison, a single parent raising her three sons alone: Mark (21), David (18) and Luke (13). Mark and David share the same

biological father whom Natalie divorced in the late eighties whilst Luke's father left Natalie three years ago, leaving behind significant financial difficulties. He refuses to have any contact with his son. Natalie lives alone with her children (and dog) and has recently entered full time employment after several years of being on benefits. Natalie discussed her 'real family' and then 'my family' again making the distinction between her blood family (comprising her mother and sister) and her family of choice (Weston, 1991). Her family of choice is made up of the many friends she has met over the years, and highlights the importance of fictive kin (Stacey, 1991); 'they are what I would consider my family, my chosen family. I have a couple of father figures, I have several mother figures, I've got at least two close sisters, I have cousins, brothers like you wouldn't believe'.

The extracts from the above families not only highlight the changing nature of twenty-first century families and how they are formed and organised, but also raise a pertinent issue in family research surrounding how to contain 'family' within a manageable unit to study. In this paper this has been based on the principal family home, although it is recognised that other family members may play a key role in shaping overall family decision-making dynamics (such as non resident parents or siblings, extended family members and grandparents).

Alongside the changing nature of familial arrangements the following four main global themes emerged from each family centred on power and influence issues: gatekeeping, microenvironments, intragenerational influence, and individual and collaborative influence attempts. The four emergent themes will be discussed in turn below.

Gatekeeping behaviour. Gatekeeping has been defined as the inability of an individual to relinquish some control over certain aspects of their responsibilities or duties (Allen and Hawkins, 1999), and is a much under studied area of behaviour (Fagan and Barnett, 2003). Within the family literature gatekeeping behaviour is often associated with wives and mothers who are reluctant to allow others to assist them in household chores and childcare duties (De Luccie, 1995). Protecting these tasks, it has been proposed, is closely linked to gender ideology (Douchet, 2001) and certain tasks and traditional gender roles help to define a sense of a person's self identity.

Homes are gendered spaces and it appears that women do more than men within families to construct the home (Perkins and Thorns, 1999) and to complete household chores (Douchet, 2001); in essence, this is their domain (Allen and Hawkins, 1999). This is highly evident in the families here where the wives and mothers frequently controlled family tasks. Although many of the mothers did begrudge having such a heavy family workload (often referred to as the second shift (Hochschild (1989), triple shift (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995) or the invisible work (Daniels, 1987) of women) they were reluctant to relinquish some of their duties to other family members. This was particularly evident in debates in the Jones family surrounding childcare and other household responsibilities. The Jones family is headed by Debbie Green (who frequently adopts her partner's surname, even though they are not married) and Paul Jones, both in their late forties. Following Paul's release from prison several months ago he has struggled to find steady work as a plumber, and the family now rely on state benefits and Debbie's income (she herself is not in full time employment) obtained from various cash in hand jobs, such as childminding and curtain making. Debbie admits that she often restricted the family tasks Paul was allowed to perform that she considered to be her responsibility:

- Debbie I mean I used to wake up in the night, and he used to wake up in the night, and he would offer to do the night feed but I'd say no, I'll do it. You know, so he couldn't win. The next day I'd be tired and he'd ask why I was tired, and you're tired because you didn't allow me to do the night feed and I'd say no, and that's how it was. That's just the way I am, I needed it done that time, that way, and the perfect way type of thing as I thought
- Interviewer Is that the same for all things?
- Debbie Yeah, I do it all the time, I'll do it because he can't do it as well as me, or as fast as me, or as good as me. I bring it on myself, really, but that's just the way it is, I'm the Mum and this is what I've got to do, that's my role.

Early family studies documented the dominance of women within specific domains, such as choosing clothes for family members (Mohan, 1995; Davis and Rigaux, 1974). French and Raven (1959) would consider gatekeeping behaviour to be a form of the legitimate power base in which parents have a legitimate right (partly due to their positional power) to control and influence their children. Debbie controls what her children eat and what they are allowed to wear, buying their clothes on a tight budget. However, her unwillingness to relinquish this control has caused considerable arguments and power

struggles within the family, with her youngest daughter, Tina (7), frequently demanding that her older sister, Anna (12), be allowed to take her clothes shopping because Tina thinks Anna is “cool”. Unfortunately Debbie likes the one-on one time which going clothes shopping with Tina brings, and subsequently she has not allowed the sisters to go shopping together. Corrigan (1998) recognises that mothers are the sole source of clothes for many children, but that a transition often occurs in the early teenage years in which daughters actively refuse to wear the clothes chosen for them by their mothers. In the Jones family this has occurred much earlier for Tina, partly as a result of Anna’s influence.

Intragenerational Influence. Cotte and Wood (2004) identified the important role of intragenerational influence (the transfer of information, beliefs, resources and advice within a given generation) highlighting that it is another much under researched topic. Given the general acceptance that siblings can act as influencing agents (Moore, Wilkie and Lutz, 2002; Andrews et al., 2004), socialisation agents (Moschis and Moore, 1979) and that children can learn from their siblings (Harris, 1995), the potential for intragenerational influence is apparent and needs further examination.

Intragenerational influence can be illustrated by remaining with the Jones family (notwithstanding the above example illustrated in the gatekeeping section in which Anna acts as an important reference person for Tina in fashion terms). Near the start of the family meetings we were told how Anna had won an Apple I-Pod in a supermarket prize draw, much to the annoyance of her brother, Michael (14), who had bought one himself months before with his own money. However, it was interesting to note that when Michael had his I-Pod Tina and Chris (9) (their other, younger, siblings) took no notice and that when Anna got hers they directed a great deal of attention towards her and her new gadget. This was because within this family Michael was called “dull” and “boring”, being a mature and responsible young man pursuing an acting career, whereas Anna was deemed “trendy”, “fashionable” and “cool” and due to this her younger siblings pay a great deal of attention to her with their subsequent purchase demands often shaped by what Anna has or deems “cool”:

Michael Well I didn’t think anyone was interested [in his I-Pod] so I just kept mine to myself but then Tina and Chris got really interested in it and wanted

Anna to show them how it worked and she lent it to them. They didn't do that with mine, they weren't bothered ... I didn't make a big thing about mine; I got it and used it. She was showing off with hers and saying how cool it was and stuff, she didn't put it down. They got really interested in it and eventually Anna showed them how it worked and she even let them borrow it for a bit

Interviewer Did they ever ask to borrow yours?

Michael No

Interviewer Would you have let them?

Michael Yes, but they didn't ask, they wanted Anna's, Anna's was better

Notions of “coolness” have been explored by O'Donnell and Wardlow (2000) who recognise that children often find themselves in a fluctuation between the actual and ideal selves and that often there is a drive to reduce such discrepancies through peer group, in this case sibling, affiliation. Anna's influence over both Tina and Chris stems from her “coolness” they ascribe to her, and as a result the products she has are viewed in equally “cool” terms. Anna therefore exploits her expert and informational power base (French and Raven, 1959) as her younger siblings perceive her to possess superior product knowledge (in terms of which goods are ‘acceptable’ to have) which ultimately shapes their own consumption choices.

Microenvironments. Within consumer research (with the notable exception of Cotte and Wood (2004) and their triadic family research) it is assumed that children will experience families in a similar way. Early research streams documented concepts such as family communication (McLeod and Chaffee, 1972) and socialisation style (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988) in which it was assumed that each child within a family would be parented, and treated, in a similar manner. In the families involved in this project this was clearly not the case. Whilst psychology has documented different family environments, marketing and consumer behaviour have not embraced the concept so far. For instance, it is proposed that siblings will experience the family environment differently as a result of factors such as ordinal position (Hoffman, 1991; Harris, 1995), gender (Huston, 1983/1985; Hoffman, 1991), the relationship they have with their parents (McCartney et al., 1991), sociableness (Harris and Liebert, 1991) and even their physical appearance (Hoffman, 1991; Harris, 1995).

The interactions amongst the blended Baldwin family children illustrate the notion of family microenvironments. Chloe (the biological child of both parents, aged six) gets

treated very differently from her sister, Roz (aged thirteen and the biological child of only one of the parents, Sharon). Whilst Chloe can do no wrong in her parents' eyes Roz is often the centre of ridicule and as a result the ease with which their influence attempts succeed is also markedly different. Whilst the parents consider themselves to have a 'good child and bad child' (Chloe and Roz, respectively) Chloe largely does not even have to ask for the things she wants:

Sharon This one [Chloe] doesn't ask, you haven't asked for anything yet
Roz Yes she has, she's asked for, she's about circled all the Argos catalogue
Sharon She's ticked things, she's ticked things. She's not actually asked

The initial meeting with the Baldwin family occurred just before Christmas and Chloe spoke at great lengths as to the many things she would like, again highlighting Sharon's short sightedness concerning the demands of her favoured daughter. Roz, on the other hand, has to engage in complex deal making to help her get the things she wants (described as a bargaining technique by Palan and Wilkes, 1997), often resulting in her contributing financially to the purchase (which usually revolved around clothes and trainers) or she displays a range of negative behaviours such as refusing to eat and displaying aggression (often towards Chloe) in an attempt to get the things she wants. French and Raven (1959) discussed displays of aggression as a coercive resource base which individuals can utilise in an attempt to change the behaviours of others. Roz also displays a great deal of persistence in her demands, with Sharon often referring to her as a 'dog with a bone' and a 'dripping tap'. Recognising the power that Chloe has over their parents, Roz also attempts to recruit Chloe to ask for the things she wants, following Palan and Wilke's (1997) persuasion influence strategy, as the next emergent theme suggests.

Individual and Collaborative Influence Attempts. The individual influence attempts of children have been documented in earlier research, but less attention has been directed towards how (and indeed if) collaborative influence attempts are made between siblings. Collaborative influence attempts were noted in each family, particularly for items where the siblings planned to share what they had asked for. The requesting of a family pet and home computer were frequently raised as examples of 'joint projects'. Whilst it has been shown that the manner in which the siblings asked for things as a collective (in terms of the influence tactics) do not differ from those used on an individual basis (for individual

needs and wants) a sense of tactic specialisation emerges. Frequently the children, individually, deployed the tactic that they were most skilled at, and once they had finished they passed the next influence phase on to another sibling to deploy their tactic of choice. Influence turn taking emerged.

Roz and Chloe Baldwin showed examples of collaborative influence attempts, partly due to Roz's low levels of power and influence on her parents. Recognising Chloe's high status in her parents' affections Roz frequently attempted to get Chloe on her side during influence attempts. This was evident on several occasions, for instance surrounding Christmas presents. Roz did not get one present she had asked for, an 'i-toy', nor did she have sufficient funds to purchase the item alone. So Roz stressed the virtues of the 'i-toy' to Chloe and highlighted the fact that they could have lots of fun using the toy together. The perceived reward (French and Raven, 1959) of playing together and the enjoyment this would bring was enough to make Chloe contribute some of her Christmas money to pay for the toy – which incidentally they have never used together, with Roz often dominating its use.

Collaborative influence attempts were also noted within the White family, a nuclear family headed by Claire and Richard. The couple have three boys; Robert (12) and twins Lee and Kevin (10). Lee is a very outgoing and dominating boy and as a result of which Robert and Kevin often band together in attempts to stop Lee getting his own way.

It appears that within the families coalitions will form in which individuals side with others in attempts to either maximise their own power standing, or reduce the power of an individual in their favour. Roz influences the actions of Chloe recognising that her parents are likely to give in to Chloe's demands rather than her own, and Robert and Kevin work together to stop Lee getting his own way all the time.

Conclusion

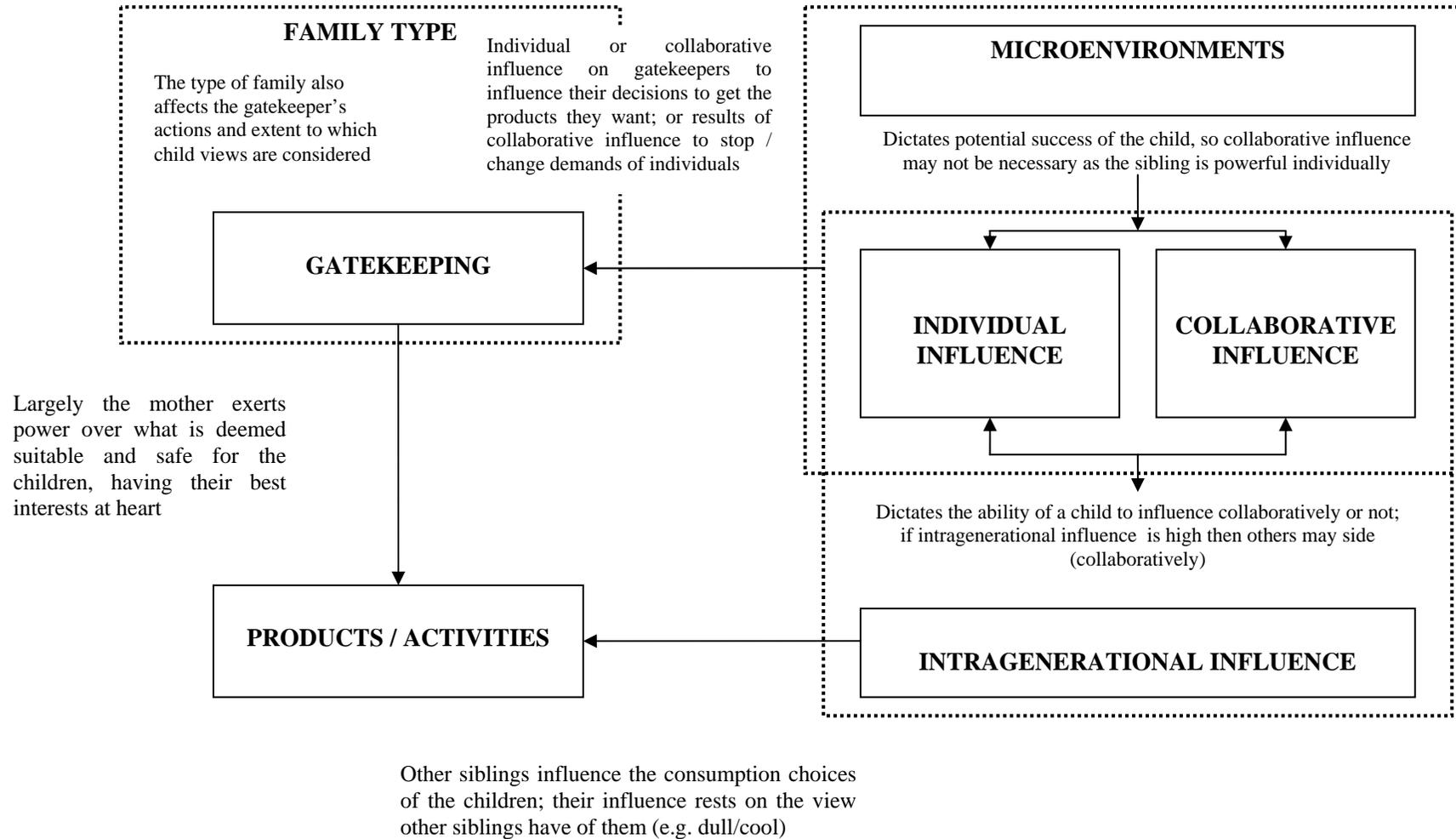
It is clear within the families studied that decision making is a dynamic process which is shaped by a range of individuals, and that the children within the families actively shaped decisions, and not just the decisions made solely by their parents, but also those decisions made by their siblings. Similarly the four emergent themes of gatekeeping,

intragenerational influence, microenvironments and individual and collaborative influence intertwine to shape the family power dynamic through which decisions are made. The key components of family consumption dynamics are mapped in Figure 1.

The foundation of the child's influence success was largely dependent upon their family microenvironment. The children within any given family were not treated in a similar manner, and it appeared that certain children (for instance, Michael "golden boy" Jones and the Baldwin's "good child" Chloe) stood a greater chance of influence success because of this. Similarly, the family type also shaped how decisions were made; in the single-parent Harrison family, for instance, Natalie shares parental power with her children who she involves in each family decision.

Whilst it is clear that indeed every family is different in some way the growing visibility of families which do not conform to nuclear notions is equally clear. Future research should pay attention to non-nuclear families because of their predominance in the twenty first century. Similarly the role of extended, and even fictive, family members needs to be explored to ascertain how they contribute to shaping the family dynamics of power around consumption decision making. Given that strategists have long been interested in who makes decisions (Munsinger, Weber and Hansen, 1975), whom to target, and which is the most effective media to use (Davis, 1971), it is important to establish who is involved in family decision making, because family consumption decisions are increasingly revolving around varying patterns of joint negotiation processes in twenty-first century families (Shepherd and Woodruff, 1988).

FIGURE 1: MAPPING OF KEY COMPONENTS OF FAMILY CONSUMPTION DYNAMICS



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