

Retail Restructuring and Consumer Choice 2:

Understanding consumer choice at the household level

Peter Jackson^υ, Rossana Perez del Aguila^υ, Ian Clarke^ϐ,
Alan Hallsworth^τ, Ronan De Kervenoael^ϐ
and Malcolm Kirkup^ϐ

^υUniversity of Sheffield,

^ϐLancaster University Management School,

^τManchester Metropolitan University

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Address for Correspondence:

Ian Clarke

Fellow, Advanced Institute of Management Research

& Professor of Marketing

Department of Marketing

Lancaster University Management School

Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YX

Email: i.clarke@lancaster.ac.uk

Tel: +44 1524 593909

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Abstract

This paper complements the preceding one by Clarke et al (2004a) which looked at the long-term impact of retail restructuring on consumer choice at the local level. While the previous paper was based on quantitative evidence from survey research, this paper draws on the qualitative phases of the same three-year study, aiming to understand how the changing forms of retail provision are experienced at the neighbourhood level within selected households. The empirical material is drawn from focus groups, accompanied shopping trips, diaries, interviews and kitchen visits with eight households in two contrasting neighbourhoods in the Portsmouth area. The data demonstrate that consumer choice involves judgements of taste, quality and value as well as more 'objective' questions of convenience, price and accessibility. These judgements are related to households' differential levels of cultural capital and involve ethical and moral considerations as well as more mundane considerations of practical utility. Our evidence suggests that many of the terms that are conventionally advanced as explanations of consumer choice (such as 'convenience', 'value' and 'habit') have very different meanings according to different household circumstances. To understand these meanings requires us to relate consumers' at-store behaviour to the domestic context in which their consumption choices are embedded. Our research demonstrates that consumer choice *between* stores can be understood in terms of accessibility and convenience, while choice *within* stores involves notions of value, price and quality. We conclude that choice *between and within* stores is strongly mediated by consumers' household context reflecting the extent to which shopping practices are embedded within consumers' domestic routines and complex everyday lives.

Key words: Consumer choice; food retailing; cultural capital; households; Portsmouth

Introduction

This is the second in a pair of papers that focus on the effects of retail restructuring on consumer choice at the local level through a three-year study of the Portsmouth area. In the previous paper (Clarke et al. 2004a) we reported the results of the extensive phases of our study, using a variety of survey data to examine the impact of retail change on consumer choice over the twenty two year period since the previous survey-work in this area by Hallsworth (1988). In this paper, we present the findings

of the intensive phases of the research, working at the neighbourhood and household level. Consistent with the previous paper, we argue that consumer choice must be assessed at the local level, where the effects of competition are experienced by consumers ‘on the ground’ (a point that was also recognised by the Competition Commission (2000) in its report on British supermarkets). Methodologically, this involves a shift from survey-based work on consumers’ at-store behaviour to a more qualitative understanding of the factors that affect consumer choice at the neighbourhood and household level. The qualitative work allows us to address the more subjective dimensions of consumer choice, including notions of cultural capital and consumer morality, as well as the more ‘objective’ factors revealed in the survey phases of the project, such as convenience, accessibility and price. Indeed, our qualitative work suggests that such terms as ‘convenience’, ‘value’ and ‘habit’ may have very different meanings for different households.

We begin with a brief review of the literature, theorising consumer choice in terms of recent arguments about shopping as social practice. We then provide a discussion of our research methods before presenting detailed empirical evidence about how households choose where and how to shop. On the basis of our research findings, we conclude that concepts of convenience and accessibility play a key role in consumer choice *between* stores; that issues of quality and value are crucial determinants of choice *within* stores; and that notions of routine and repertoire are key issues affecting consumer choice *within and between* stores.

Shopping as social practice

Our approach to consumer choice is rooted in theories of social practice. In Bourdieu’s influential account (Bourdieu 1977), practice is understood as ‘concrete human activity’, governed by customary rules that are reproduced through practical mastery. Practices are historically embedded, made and re-made through countless acts of repetition, governed by routine and habit but with scope for improvisation within established conventions. Practice is an art, accomplished through a system of durable, transposable dispositions (*habitus*) rather than a science, governed by exact rules and invariable logic. Though enacted by individuals, practices are always social in the sense that their successful performance requires competent social actors who are knowledgeable of the (explicit or implicit) rules that govern their conduct.

Theories of social practice emphasise how individuals become knowledgeable and skilful actors as members of a particular *community of practice* (Lave 1993). From this perspective, understanding the situated nature of social practice requires an investigation of how shared meanings are negotiated (within households and families, for example) and how such meanings become grounded in concrete social reality (through the choice of where to shop and what to buy).

As applied to the study of consumer behaviour, practices should be understood as *social accomplishments* rather than as choices made by sovereign individuals. Previous work on shopping as social practice includes Miller et al's (1998) work on Brent Cross and Wood Green shopping centres and Gregson et al's work on charity shopping (summarised in Gregson & Crewe 2003). Within that body of work, two papers stand out as most closely related to this part of our current research. The first is Jackson and Holbrook's (1996) paper on the 'multiple meanings' of shopping practices in North London. On the basis of focus group research in Brent Cross and Wood Green, Jackson and Holbrook identify five characteristics of contemporary shopping practices. They are: shopping as a skilled social practice; shopping as a source of pleasure and anxiety; shopping as a socially situated activity; shopping as a highly and complexly gendered process; and consumers as knowing, active subjects. Our current work in Portsmouth (based on the observation of shopping practices and the organisation of domestic space within the home as well as an analysis of consumers' discursive practices as revealed through focus groups, diaries and interviews) confirms the salience of these themes from the London study (derived mainly on the basis of focus group research).

The other paper that closely parallels our own work is Gregson et al's (2002) essay on shopping, space and practice. Here, consumption practices are approached through shoppers' relations with particular goods and through particular relations of looking. Their work investigates the socialities of shopping and the place of shopping within the rhythms of everyday life. Regarding the former, they suggest that shopping involves more than the selection of pre-given retail locations. Rather, they insist, modes of shopping are *constitutive* of shopping spaces, as consumers themselves contribute to the relational construction of space. (This is a crucial finding in terms of our subsequent discussion of how consumers construct social distinctions through

shopping, as signalled, for example, by their reference to ‘nice’ shops and ‘pleasant’ staff.) Regarding the place of shopping within everyday life, Gregson et al. demonstrate the importance of relating individuals’ shopping practices to their *personal biographies and subject positions*. They conclude that:

“shopping geographies are not pre-given, but are constituted by weaving together the particular ... (in this case knowledge about specific charity shops) and the general (how to charity shop) through situated practices (modes of charity shopping that are always ‘located’)... These practices themselves invest particular meanings in generic types of retail environment” (2002, p. 607).

As a final cue to our own work, we note Warde’s (2004) paper on consumption-as-practice. Warde suggests that future research should investigate the conditions that give rise to particular practices, their prevalence within different communities, and the infrastructure that is required for their reproduction. Our own research moves in this direction though it has less historical depth and social reach than Warde himself advocates. Our approach favours an in-depth exploration of the consumption practices of a limited number of households in two contrasting neighbourhoods, following those practices through from their household setting, to the observation of shopping practices and purchasing behaviours, back into the household environment as goods are taken into the home and reincorporated within particular domestic routines and family lives.

Methodology

Our study employed a combination of different methods to achieve an in-depth understanding of consumers’ shopping practices. The use of focus groups, accompanied shopping trips, diaries and kitchen visits provided an opportunity to triangulate our data (Denzin 1978). It was also a valuable research strategy that enhanced the validity and reliability of our results. Each of the methods that we used revealed different aspects of participants’ shopping experience. Our findings relied on the complementarity of the results from each method.

The qualitative study began with focus groups in Paulsgrove and Purbrook, two contrasting neighbourhoods in the Portsmouth area. Drawing on the survey results, we focused this phase of the study on two areas with distinct socio-economic characteristics. Paulsgrove is a post-war housing estate located in the north of

Portsmouth. It is the second most deprived ward in Portsmouth with 4.3% unemployment and 54.7% owner-occupied housing. By contrast, Purbrook is a middle class neighbourhood with 83.1% owner-occupied houses and unemployment levels of 2%.¹

Focus groups were conducted in each neighbourhood in November 2002. Ten participants were recruited through local contacts in Paulsgrove, plus a further eight participants in Purbrook. The objective of the focus groups was to uncover public discourses about food shopping to get an initial understanding of consumer choice at the local level. The focus groups were designed to encourage participants to talk about three general themes: what they liked or disliked about food shopping; their attitudes towards retail change, competition between stores, and comparison with the past; and their experiences within their chosen stores.

The second stage of the qualitative research involved eighteen months fieldwork in Paulsgrove and Purbrook, working with eight households, four in each neighbourhood (see *Table 1*). Based on the methodological principles of case study research, our selection aimed to ensure ‘variety but not necessarily representativeness’ (Stake 1994: 244; see also Mitchell 1983). Our eight households generated ten ‘main shoppers’ with married couples sharing the task in two of the households and with the other six households all represented by female shoppers. Participants were informed about the nature of the project and were offered a small payment to encourage their continued involvement over the full eighteen-month period (£100 at the recruitment stage and £100 on completion of the fieldwork). Informants were asked for their written consent to share all the information that we gathered, suitably anonymised for publication.

Table 1: Key informants

Paulsgrove	Purbrook and environs
Laura (late 20s)	Paul and Wanda (60s)
Nigel (late 30s) and Zara (late 20s)	Sheila (50s)
Nora (early 30s)	Joan (mid 30s)
Eleanor (mid 30s)	Hilary (mid 40s)

¹ The previous paper (Clarke et al. 2004a) provides comparative data on the Portsmouth area confirming that it is broadly representative of ‘middle England’.

Fieldwork started with accompanied shopping trips, on the basis that ‘shopping with consumers’ was a valuable research procedure for understanding consumers’ shopping experiences *in situ* (Otnes et al. 1995). We carried out two accompanied shopping trips with each informant on their regular shopping days and times, and with their usual companions. The first trip was more of an unstructured observation, designed to elicit a relatively unmediated view of shoppers’ purchasing behaviour. Based on the first shopping experience, the second trip was more structured, asking participants to explain their choices as they shopped. We took notes and tape-recorded both accompanied shopping trips using an inconspicuous microphone suitable for a supermarket environment.

Informants were also asked to keep a food shopping diary for a period of ten days. Following a series of guidelines recommended in the literature (Burgess 1987; Corti 1993), we adopted a semi-structured approach in designing the diary. We asked participants to write about their feelings, emotions, likes and dislikes during their shopping experience. Not all the participants were equally able to express their feelings in writing, but even short answers proved to have significant meaning for our analysis. The diary was a useful research tool not only for recording routines and everyday shopping practices (Elliot 1997; Meth, 2003) but also for reflection on those practices. When they had completed their diaries, participants were asked to reflect on the experience and to consider whether the exercise had led them to alter their normal behaviour in any way (as the following quotations demonstrate): *When I read it, I found that we eat an awful lot of cakes and bread!!* (Joan); *I have realised my lifestyle is such that I don’t need to do a big shop ... this diary has semi organised me ... to occasionally think about the next meal...* (Sheila); *I knew I was organised, now I’m certain!* (Paul).

Kitchen visits were the final stage of the fieldwork. As with Vu’s study (2000), we used a combination of observations, photographs and semi-structured interviews to get a sense of people’s kitchens, food habits, and lifestyles. Sitting around the kitchen-table, as in Gullestad’s study (1984), we encouraged participants to talk about their domestic environment. Unlike other studies where ‘consuming kitchens’ has been the focus of attention (e.g. Miller 1988; Southerton, 2003) our study used the kitchen to

understand the geographical space where food consumption and other mundane activities take place.

For the analysis we used NUDIST to manage the data, Framework Analysis to identify themes (Ritchie & Spencer 1994), and 'grounded theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to move progressively towards a more abstract understanding of our data. We carried out an analysis 'within cases' -- in order to become familiar with each household -- and a thematic analysis 'across cases' (Huberman & Miles 1994). Following Jones' (2000) experience of analysing solicited diaries using Framework Analysis, we systematically applied the same coding procedures to develop themes and categories. Building on those categories, we analysed transcripts from accompanied shopping trips and kitchen visits. The initial identification of general themes involved all of the research team members. Later stages were conducted principally by two members of the team (Perez del Aguila and Jackson). Re-reading, building on and revisiting earlier codes ensured that our interpretation was as grounded as possible.

Framework Analysis provided a systematic way of coding the data, reducing over 20 initial categories to a smaller number of ever-more-abstract themes. The final three constructs (around which this paper is written) represent the highest level of abstraction derived from our analysis of the data. We are confident that our case study findings are generalizable to other neighbourhoods and cities because of the way the research was designed (with the results of the earlier survey work feeding into the later qualitative analysis) and because of the systematic way we have analysed the data. In this respect, our work follows previous studies such as those undertaken by Wallman in South London (Wallman et al. 1982; Wallman 1984), where survey work was integrated with in-depth ethnographic research and where the evidence from eight London households, set firmly within their social and geographical context, provided a sound empirical basis for wider claims to be made. In the next three sections of the paper, we present our empirical findings, organised to highlight the factors that affect consumer choice *between* and *within* stores.

1. Choice *between* stores: convenience and accessibility

In the survey phase of our work (reported in Clarke et al. 2004a) we found that the reasons cited for people's choice of store varied between different neighbourhoods. Based on a content analysis of the responses to our neighbourhood survey, we identified a range of factors that affect consumers' choice of where to shop. These include convenience, quality, service, price, distance and product range. In working class neighbourhoods such as Paulsgrove, distance or accessibility, followed by price, were the categories with the highest number of responses. In richer neighbourhoods such as Purbrook, quality and service were regarded as the most important factors when choosing a store. In all neighbourhoods the word 'convenience' was mentioned as one of the top three reasons for choosing a store. But what does 'convenience' mean for informants? Phrases like 'convenient parking', 'convenient hours' and 'convenient store' suggest that the concept needs to be carefully unpacked in order to avoid homogenising a range of potentially different meanings.

When respondents talked about the choice of a particular store in terms of its 'convenience', our evidence suggests that they were referring to a number of quite different things. The most obvious meaning is about physical accessibility, measured in terms of distance, as when one of our focus group participants said: *I would say that this is probably the most convenient one... Just because we live up here [in Paulsgrove]. This is the main superstore in our way* (Nigel, shopping trip).

But accessibility, measured in terms of distance or travel time, is rarely the only consideration about where to shop and some of our respondents, like Sheila, never go to their nearest store (Asda) even though it is just across the road from where she lives. When asked why she doesn't shop there, her response is mostly about the store's change in ownership and its sheer size:

Sheila: When they first used to be there they used to be the Co-op, long ago and it became the hypermarket, then after that it got taken over and became Asda. When Asda first started it wasn't so big and that wasn't too bad, I used to pop up (Shopping trip, Purbrook).²

For other informants, 'convenience' refers to the ease with which shopping at a particular store can be combined with other commitments:

² In fact, Sheila's recollection is not entirely reliable on this point. The Co-op built the original hypermarket which was subsequently demolished and rebuilt by Asda.

Hilary: Yes, I mean I fit the shopping in, if it's convenient I fit it in with collecting Sally from school or something because it's economical with petrol hopefully and all that sort of thing, and time – um – yes...

Sometimes I'll pick Sally up from school, that's really about it I think, sometimes if I want to pick up something that I can only get from a specialist shop in Havant, I will park the car in Tesco's – if I've got the time – go and get that shopping then come back and do the Tesco shopping. But also then, whether I'm coming straight home or not, things that are frozen obviously I've got to get home pretty quickly and I don't buy ice cream unless I'm coming straight home (Kitchen visit, Purbrook)

In other cases, these meanings appear to be combined:

Rossana: You prefer to buy here in Asda, you told me

Joan: When I first moved in I used it [Safeway] a few times because of the convenience but now I'm trying to go back to Asda. I try and do it when I've dropped the children from school again. I broke the routine for a bit but – I think it was school holidays when we moved in so I wasn't going, taking them to school so that's why I used that then (Kitchen visit, Purbrook)

For other respondents, 'convenience' has to do with the frequency of shopping, the availability of resources for large-scale shopping, and the range of other services provided. It can relate to more subjective notions of quality and freshness. It can also refer to the crowdedness of the shopping environment and to the possibility of buying goods in the appropriate quantities:

Yes, basically it's the convenience and I just buy you know once a week... it would take a lot you would have to have a lot more money available, wouldn't you, to go less often because you would have to buy more stuff. It just worked out that I have to make it weekly and that's fine at the moment (Hilary, Kitchen visit, Purbrook)

I usually buy petrol here...Tesco still has LRP petrol, is reasonable priced + get points on my clubcard. It is convenient' (Hilary, Shopping diary, Day 7)

I prefer to go to the butcher's... It's convenient because there you can have it fresh, you know if I'm passing regularly which I am at the moment; you can buy the amount you want, not what's in the packet... (Hilary, Shopping trip)

Hilary: Oh I went in there [Lidl] once to buy one thing and there was a huge queue ... but I wouldn't go there because it's not convenient, I don't go past it...

Rossana: It's not convenient because it's not near...

Hilary: No, it's near where I work so that's the only reason I went in because it's near where I work

Rossana: But you wouldn't go because it's not convenient in what sense?

Hilary: It's too far away from home – and I don't like it either, I didn't like what I saw (Kitchen visit)

Smaller local stores, such as the Co-op, were also described as 'convenient' in terms of meeting consumers' immediate needs for top-up shopping, although several people regarded such stores as prohibitively expensive or limited in terms of the range and quality of goods. Asked why she chose to shop at the Co-op, Eleanor replied: *Convenience, if I've run out of something I always go in there and get it; like they've*

started doing offers, I have a look at the offers, if I need it I get them, if I don't need them then I don't get it (Kitchen visit).

As with 'convenience', 'access' and 'accessibility' have a wide range of meanings. At their simplest, the terms refer to physical distance: *I go to Sainsbury's because it's just the nearest place really* (Focus group participant, Purbrook) or *Sainsbury is out of the way* (Eleanor, Kitchen visit). In other cases, stores that are physically adjacent may still be considered inaccessible, as is the case for some Paulsgrove residents who did not patronise their nearby Tesco superstore because getting there involved crossing a busy road (Focus group, Paulsgrove). For other residents 'access' refers to having good parking facilities: *I know [Sainsbury] is a little bit tucked away but to me I'm quite happy in there ... it's easy to park* (Focus group, Paulsgrove). It can also refer to physical access for people with baby buggies, as one focus group participant noted: *Bigger supermarkets have got better access than little corner shops 'cause you couldn't even get a twin pushchair through ... and then somewhere like Tesco's ... they've got good access, but the Co-op and things like that, they're rubbish* (Focus group, Paulsgrove). In other instances, notions of accessibility are much more subtle, as in the assertion: *They forget us up here* (Focus group, Paulsgrove). While 'convenience' and 'accessibility' are clearly key words in explaining consumer choice between stores, our evidence suggests the importance of unpacking these rather generic terms, where subtle differences are revealed between households. Similar arguments apply to other terms such as 'value' and 'habit' as the following sections reveal.

2. Choice *within* stores: value, price and quality

Our research suggests that choice *within* stores is commonly understood in terms of socially constructed notions of value and the trade-off between price and quality. Like 'convenience', we suggest, 'value' is a term that has a wide range of connotations. When people refer to 'value for money', they are drawing moral distinctions as well as making judgements about relative price. Moral judgements are pervasive in consumption talk, whether the discussion is about 'junk' food, 'decent' coffee or where to do a 'proper' shop. While the literature on ethical consumption is usually restricted to a narrow range of self-consciously ethical consumers (such as those who buy Fairtrade goods), we prefer to emphasise the much wider range of

practices that consumers refer to in moral or ethical terms. In Paulsgrove, for example, several respondents talked about the impossibility of doing a ‘proper shop’ in some stores. This had to do with their familiarity with the store layout and other factors such as brands, quantities, quality and price:

Nora: *I can't say I'm keen on Asda ... I don't like it, I can't shop properly over there* (Shopping trip, Paulsgrove)

Nora: *I think the Co-op needs to be shut down ... I will go there as a last resort and it has to be a last resort, I can't shop properly over there* (Shopping trip)

Rossana: When you mentioned Asda, you told me “I can't shop properly there”, why is that, I didn't understand?

Nora: *When you're going up the aisle, I can't never find nothing and I don't like it at all over there. I couldn't find nothing that I wanted and it seemed to be set out weird, I didn't rate it, I wouldn't like to shop there all the time. I suppose because I'm used to Tesco's... they've got everything there, if you didn't want to go nowhere else you ain't got to* (Kitchen visit, Paulsgrove).

Laura: *I've been to Sainsbury, Asda and, er, Safeway ... You just can't get a proper shop in there... They're too far away and, I dunno, they've got lots of their own brand haven't they, it's dearer than Tesco's as well* (Shopping trip, Paulsgrove).

While these comments relate mostly to ‘objective’ factors like prices, store layout and location, many other comments about value can only be understood in terms of more subjective notions of identity, taste and quality. If working class residents in Paulsgrove reject stores where they can't do a ‘proper shop’, middle class residents in Purbrook express a similar range of social distinctions through reference to ‘nice’ shops, ‘pleasant’ staff and ‘quality’ goods. In both cases, reference back to Gregson et al's (2002) argument about the way consumers play an active role in the relational constitution of retail space is instructive. The focus group discussion in Purbrook was full of such distinctions, further born out in subsequent interviews and shopping diaries, particularly in relation to shopping at Waitrose:

Waitrose ...is small like the old family shop [where] you know all the assistants.

Waitrose is a well laid out shop... I don't like Tesco.

Because Waitrose in Havant isn't too big...the quality is good and the service is good and they're always very pleasant.

Waitrose is nicer...it's got a coffee bar.

I do Waitrose in Waterlooville ...it is very nice and I would be more than happy to do the bulk of my shopping there if I could. It's actually very quiet...they sell...quality things (Focus group, Purbrook)

I enjoyed shopping today it made a change to go to Waitrose...as it's such a nice shop, I could spend ages wandering around the shop (Joan, Shopping diary)

We do nearly all our food shopping at Waitrose, we are familiar with the layout, like the uncluttered aisles and absence of harsh merchandising (Paul, Shopping diary)

Similar arguments were also applied to the choice of particular products, as in the following extract from one of our informant's shopping diary:

nice fresh bread + cakes

a nice salad...

I brought some nice breaded fish, new potatoes + peas for tea...

(Joan, Shopping diary)

For most of our respondents, consumer choice involves a trade-off between price and quality. This was true for informants in Paulsgrove as well as for those in Purbrook, though in the former case, 'quality' was often expressed in terms of a preference for branded goods (over supermarkets' own-brand or value lines). This raises important issues in terms of the way consumer choice functions in the construction and circulation of cultural capital.

'Cultural capital' is the term used by Bourdieu (1984) to refer to the acquisition of social status through cultural practices that involve social distinctions of taste or the exercise of moral judgement. As Bourdieu shows, some people may be high in economic capital and low in cultural capital (or vice versa), and one form of capital can sometimes be substituted for another. The exercise of consumer choice among our case study households in Portsmouth included many examples of the creation of cultural capital or value through the use of social distinctions. For example, consumers often insisted that questions of taste, colour and freshness were as important as more mundane notions of price, convenience or accessibility -- and not just among those with the greatest economic capital:

Nora: I tried the Value beans and they tasted like bullets ... I had a Value pie and burgers before and to be honest it don't taste like you're eating the food, I'd rather buy -- I'd buy Tesco's own make but not Value (Kitchen visit, Paulsgrove).

Among our case study households, the most cost-conscious consumers (who calculated prices per gram) including residents from the 'middle class' neighbourhood of Purbrook (Hilary and Sheila). For most households, the trade-off between price and quality varied significantly between different commodities. Nigel and Zara, for example, were prepared to buy cheap spaghetti but insisted on more expensive, better quality, pasta sauce. Several respondents also noted that branded coffee was worth the extra expense: *One thing I always have is decent coffee. There's nothing worst than having cheap coffee (Hilary, Purbrook, Shopping trip).*

These kinds of choices, we suggest, relate to social distinctions, with associated moral and ethical dimensions, as well as to practical issues of taste and flavour. A stated preference for ‘taste’ over convenience and price was particularly common among middle-class residents in Purbrook:

I'd rather have quality and not very much than lots of it and not eat it.

I tend not to look at the price too much...

Definitely taste, but I think my shopping habits have changed since the children left home really...It's salmon now instead of fish fingers (Focus group participants, Purbrook).

Residents in Purbrook were also concerned about quality and taste, though in this case their preferences were often related to issues of social respectability (as discussed by Skeggs 1997). For example, one of our focus group respondents insisted that they would not buy cheap meat, preferring to pay extra for ‘decent stuff’. Nora made a similar observation about buying cheap meat and vegetables from the local Co-op.

Nora: ... their meat always looks like it's gone off, their veg is disgusting ... The fruit and veg is never ever fresh, I don't think it is and lots of people round here don't think it is and their meat don't look very nice. I'd rather walk across the bridge [to shop at Tesco] (Kitchen visit, Paulsgrove).

Her reference to ‘lots of people round here’ suggests that social judgements are being made with reference to local norms in exactly the way discussed by Bourdieu in his analysis of cultural capital. Focus group participants in Purbrook also stressed the importance of freshness and quality when shopping for groceries:

I think that eggs are the thing – I just go to the supermarket for most things but I would make a special trip for eggs ... free range eggs – well my brother in law has his own hens on a farm in Wales and when they make a sponge it turns out that colour – the colour of the eggs – whereas if you make one with the eggs you buy in the supermarket they turn out sort of beige, they're not brown and even these free range eggs are pale whereas I think the yolks should be really golden shouldn't they if they're free range and eggs I think don't taste the same even the free range ones in the supermarket so I would go to a small place to get my eggs.

I never went there [Charlotte Street market in Portsmouth] because you'd end up with bruised bananas and brown apples and squashy tomatoes. The nice ones at the front were for show and you got all the rubbish at the back...

Yes, but I do find that fruit and veg don't taste, haven't got much flavour nowadays. You see these lovely shiny red apples, get them home and they're tasteless. You go abroad to all these lovely markets in France and the Mediterranean and their fruit and veg is lovely – they don't look as nice but they're full of flavour I find it's very hard to get nice fruit and veg now, it looks good but just doesn't taste nearly as good (Focus group participants, Purbrook)

In this case, the contours of good taste are more widely drawn than in the previous example, encompassing family members (on a farm in Wales) and a contrast between the ‘lovely markets’ encountered on holiday abroad (in France and the Mediterranean) and the (poorer quality) local markets in Portsmouth.

Expressions of consumer choice within store are also highly gendered, as in the following exchange between Nigel and Zara, where Nigel tries to justify his choice of cheap shampoo in 'rational' terms, describing Zara's preference for branded shampoo in more 'emotional' terms, while Zara counters with a practical justification for her choice:

Zara: *He [Nigel] always goes for the cheaper ones but I want some Head and Shoulders...*

Nigel: *The other difference is, as Zara said, I'll always buy the cheap one but I'll always go for the two in one with these sort of things whereas with Zara - it's a woman's thing I think. You tend to buy for the individual i.e. yourself, whereas I tend to buy for the family...also I think about the wastage -- my children get the shampoo and that and just tip it down the sink.... whereas Zara is "I'll have Head and Shoulders because I've got very fine hair"...*

Zara: *I wash my hair frequently otherwise it gets a bit greasy ...Yes, he's been getting one that's called Headstrong which is similar to Head and Shoulders, a cheaper version, but I've been getting a really bad itchy scalp ... and I'm sick of scratching (Shopping trip, Paulsgrove).*

The moral dimensions of consumer choice are often expressed in relation to other family members (cf. Miller 1998). A particularly telling example occurred in Paulsgrove where a mother was showing us around her kitchen. Opening her kitchen cupboards, Nora drew our attention to several bottles of juice: *in case you think I'm dehydrating my kids* (Kitchen visit). This is a perfect demonstration of what Skeggs (1997: 3-4) describes as the 'burden of class', where working-class mothers struggle hard to be recognised as respectable, through processes of identification and disidentification. In these circumstances, consumption practices are constantly monitored and adjusted, with moral as well as practical considerations in mind. In another example from Paulsgrove, one respondent justified her choice of instant mashed potatoes and her reliance on microwave cooking in terms of the needs of her family, reconciling the demands of being a 'good mother' with the use of convenience foods and modern technology:

I always buy the instant mash, it just happens that it's on offer this week. And I always buy like tray meals because sometimes [my daughter] will come back from work at 6 and she's got to go back out at 7 and if I'm not home then she can just chuck it in the microwave so that she's got a quick meal. Because she comes home from one job at quarter to 6, 6 o'clock, and then she starts another job at 7 so she's got to go out at quarter to 7, so she's only got about half an hour to have something to eat (Eleanor, Shopping trip, Paulsgrove).

Similar arguments apply in Purbrook, where Sheila had no difficulty in reconciling the convenience of microwave cooking with her status as a good wife:

No this is ideal when Tom - if he wants to - if he's playing tennis, he can microwave it - he can microwave at work and he used to have other things as well to go with it like rice and then

I would buy him perhaps a meal (or pasta meal) and then he would put the two things together (Sheila, Shopping trip, Purbrook).

Yes, if it was just say – sweet and sour chicken – you can stick that in the microwave and then I would buy packets of rice and say to him “right bung that in at the same time as you’re doing the food and it will microwave at the same time, then you’ve got something else to eat with the sweet and sour chicken” (Sheila, Kitchen visit, Purbrook)

These examples all demonstrate that, particularly in terms of consumer choice *within* stores, a range of subjective factors come into play, above and beyond the factors of convenience and accessibility that appear to govern choice *between* stores. Issues of quality and taste are regularly invoked, drawing on a moral vocabulary and on constructions of cultural capital, as well as more practical considerations of price and utility.

3. Choice *within* and *between* stores: routines and repertoires

In this final section, we argue that consumer choice between and within stores can best be understood in terms of the way that people’s shopping practices are socially embedded within the complex routines of their domestic lives and rapidly evolving household structures (cf. Williams et al. 2001). One of the most striking features of our research was the extent to which household size and composition changed over a relatively short period of time, and how these changes impacted on household consumption practices. As is well known, contemporary family structures are highly dynamic, with many households no longer fitting the traditional nuclear family model (Allan & Crown 2001; Silva & Smart 1999). Our case study households include a single mother living with her own child, two foster children and her boyfriend; couples living with children from different partners; single-person households; couples living on their own after children had left to study at university; and a more ‘traditional’ family consisting of two parents and their children. During the course of our fieldwork several changes occurred in the respondents’ household composition, and as a consequence consumption choices had to adapt to the new circumstances. It is evident that traditional life-cycle models based on household progress through a series of stages (e.g. Murphy & Staples 1979) are of questionable use in understanding the diversity of contemporary family structures. Modern households are complex and rapidly changing, as retailers and consumer researchers are beginning to recognise (e.g. Lawson 1988).

Laura and Hilary's households both demonstrate how much diversity exists within contemporary family life. It is not only that traditional family members do not cohabit in each of these households but that the sort of relationships and arrangements are constantly evolving. Changes in household composition have an immediate impact on consumption choices as the following examples demonstrate:

When we first met Laura in November 2002 during a focus group, she was a 27 year old single mother living with her three children: a 7 year-old boy, 4 year-old girl and a nineteen-month baby boy. As the fieldwork evolved ... it became apparent that the 7 year-old boy was Laura's only biological child. She was fostering the other two children who were her sister's biological children. *"She don't live round here. The kids got taken away from her [three years ago] so they came to live with me"* (Laura, Shopping trip, Paulsgrove).

In June 2003 when we finished doing the fieldwork with Laura, her boyfriend was living with her too. He had moved in with her two weeks prior to our visit. *"Yes, I do spend more now... It's the same stuff with the kids but he has different [packed lunch] to what the kids have. He likes Muller Rice and they have yoghurts, and he has sausage rolls, the bigger ones where the kids only have the snack size ones"* (Laura, Kitchen visit, Paulsgrove)

Hilary lives with her husband and two children: a fifteen-year-old boy and nine year old girl. Two of their children have left home to go to the university:

It's amazing how it has changed [my pattern of shopping]. Especially now that we've got two at the universities. And then I suddenly realised before Christmas I've been saving a bit of money...and suddenly realised that that really was going to pay for the extra food. Because not only you have extra treats for Christmas but because you've got these two extra bodies [giggles] But having said that because they went away for a few days after Christmas, I didn't have to get a huge amount (Shopping trip, Purbrook).

Our research also suggests that consumer choice is socially embedded within households' increasingly complex everyday lives, with shopping 'fitted in' around people's other responsibilities and commitments (childcare, work, leisure etc). Food shopping, in particular, is usually regarded as a chore to be done in combination with other routines:

[After shopping] I went to the gym. Had a driving lesson then picked Maria up from school. Picked shopping up after school (Eleanor, Shopping diary, Day 1).

I went to Commercial Rd to pay some bills, then we took Maria to the dentist, then half an hour in park, then we done the shopping. (Eleanor, Shopping diary, Day 4)

We went to the Post Office, then Co-op to do gas and top up the phone. Then we done the shopping (Eleanor, Shopping diary, Day 8, Paulsgrove).

The socially-embedded nature of shopping practices can also be demonstrated by the fact that, even when people are shopping alone or with friends, they are often shopping on behalf of other family members:

I'll always buy them because the kids don't eat fat or bones, they're funny...That's the only ham [my husband] will eat, wafer thin (Nora, Shopping trip, Paulsgrove).

In some cases, absent family members may also be 'virtually' present:

Sheila: *[My son] lives on his own but if he needs anything I just text him and ask: "Is there anything you need?"...*

Later on, when we were in the supermarket, she sent her son a text to ask what he needed. A few minutes later she got a message: *'Frosties and Milk. Love J...'*

Sheila: *I'll look at the phone, John's sent me a message...he's obviously alright for food (Shopping trips, Purbrook)*

Not all kinds of shopping are equally routinised but 'family shopping' for food and other necessities is among the most clearly routinised (compared to personal shopping for treats or other specialty goods). In their study of charity shopping, Gregson et al. (2002) differentiate between two contrasting modes of shopping, associated with 'necessity' and 'choice'. They characterise the former as routinised, regular and methodical; the latter as sporadic, spontaneous and dislocated. Our research suggests that this distinction may be over-drawn and that similar consumers can hold quite contrasting views of the same shopping space or even the same goods (compare Nick and Zena's discussion of shampoo, for example). Indeed, we would suggest that ambivalence is a fundamental characteristic of many contemporary consumer practices (cf. Otnes et al. 1997).

Where people undertake grocery shopping with others, they seem to prefer to do this as a 'relief' from regular household commitments, either on their own, or often shopping with friends rather than with their partners or children. Whether people see shopping as a laborious or recreational activity often depends on who they are shopping with (Prus & Dawson 1991; Prus 1993). As the following examples demonstrate, for shopping to be enjoyable often requires the right company or a degree of autonomy and independence from others:

I prefer to go on my own. I don't like being rushed... (Nigel, Shopping trip, Paulsgrove).

Yes I do prefer shopping with someone, I find it quite boring on my own... Not with the kids, that stresses me because you don't get half of what you want to get (Nora, Kitchen visit, Paulsgrove).

I think my idea of hell is going shopping on a Saturday with my husband (Hilary, Shopping trip, Purbrook).

Our results also demonstrate that, for some people, shopping practices are governed by the regular (weekly or monthly) cycle of benefit payments and other sources of income. Nora, for example, organises her food shopping once a week in Tesco and once a month in Iceland. Her husband gets his salary weekly and she gets child benefit once a month. Eleanor gets her family tax credit on Tuesday and goes

shopping to Asda or Iceland. Her husband receives his weekly salary on Thursday so she goes to Tesco on Fridays. Hilary shops once a week on Wednesdays because she used to collect child benefit on that day from the Post Office. When she ceased to be paid this allowance, she continued to shop on Wednesdays. Nigel's shopping practices are strongly routinised for a variety of similar reasons:

Nigel: *Friday's the only day I have to myself...*

Rossana: Why is that the only day?

Nigel: *Because of the routine of the house and picking the children up from school and such like. By the Friday they don't have to go to school the next day so Zara tends to pick them up, go to her group and come home a little bit later so I actually go fishing that day don't I? Also I've got a friend who goes fishing with me and that's the only day available for him – again he's disabled so – so I have Fridays to myself so when I actually do go shopping it's like being allowed out if you know what I mean! A bit of time to yourself, that's what I like about it. It's paying off because I actually find cheaper places or shops to try out (Kitchen visit)*

I have to admit today we had less to spend than I would have hoped, my money hasn't come through today

Rossana: Why didn't it?

Nigel: *They've changed the circumstances on income support. It's all changed; so what we did is we actually went to the bank and took some money out of Zara's bank account so we could do today's shopping, so we were about £40 less than what we had hoped, so this is why we went for budget day today (Shopping trip).*

Our findings suggest that shopping is habitual in the sense that consumers follow established patterns of behaviour, rarely exercising conscious choice or rational deliberation. Shopping is a good example of what Bourdieu refers to as a habituated form of 'learned ignorance' (1977: 156), involving repetition, customary knowledge and 'practical mastery' (as opposed to the kind of knowledge that is based on formal rules or precise calculation). Though shopping practices are socially embedded and repetitive in nature, there is always scope for improvisation, based on consumers' tacit knowledge, social competence and skill. This provides a slightly different emphasis from previous studies of consumer behaviour that understand habit as a continuation of past behaviour (Triandis 1977) or as 'behaviour without deliberation' (Garling & Axhausen 2003). In our view, consumer choice between and within stores is closely related to their other domestic routines, strongly mediated by their household context (see *Figure 1*).

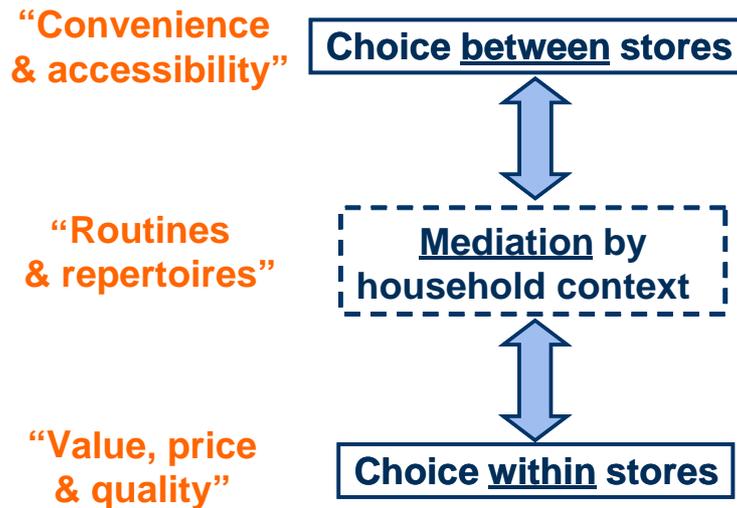


Figure 1: The mediation of consumer choice by household context

The socially-embedded nature of people’s shopping practices, rooted within the complexities of contemporary households and domestic routines, often results in the development of a repertoire of stores in order to fulfil consumers’ various needs. The survey evidence suggests that while most Portsmouth households can identify a ‘main store’ in which they do the bulk of their shopping, they also typically use a range of other stores to supplement the ‘main store’. The idea of using a repertoire of stores to fulfil a household’s needs is comparable to the ‘coping strategies’ that have been identified in recent studies of British ‘food deserts’ (Whelan et al. 2002; Wrigley et al. 2004). While the situation in Portsmouth is clearly much less extreme than the Seacroft area in Leeds studied by Wrigley et al. (Clarke et al. 2004b), there is clear evidence of relative disadvantage, both among poorer households in Paulsgrove and among elderly residents in Purbrook where lack of access to a car leads to serious problems of restricted mobility.

Most people in our Portsmouth study used a relatively small repertoire of stores and were reluctant to change store when new opportunities became available. The stores themselves encourage this kind of habitual practice through familiar store layouts and the use of ‘loyalty’ cards.³ Branding is also a strong source of habitual behaviour in

³ That they are not always successful in this aim is suggested by consumers’ frequently voiced complaint about changes in store layout and the ensuing disruption to their established routines.

people's shopping practices with consumers recalling favourite brands (Heinz tomato soup, Kellogg's cornflakes, Bisto gravy) that they have known since childhood.

Routines are, however, subject to change and revisions often reflect changes in household context (as discussed above). While shopping practices may be habitual, consumers are reflexive agents (Sweetman 2003), monitoring their conduct and making appropriate adjustments as their circumstances change. Consumers are knowledgeable, skilled and competent social actors, even if shopping is rarely 'strategic' in the sense of goal-directed behaviour, based on complete knowledge and a fully rational assessment of alternatives (Crow, 1989). Routines can be broken, as the following examples demonstrate.

Nigel and Zara have learned to shop in difficult economic circumstances. Nigel uses a calculator while shopping in order to retain control of their limited budget. They visit the small Tesco in Cosham instead of using the bigger store in North Harbour when they are short of money. Recently, however, Nigel and Zara have switched stores having got access to a car:

It used to be a lot worse than this really. You know I didn't use to have a car...We used to come [to Tesco North Harbour] by bus and get a taxi home. [With the car] we can actually get around to different shops now, we can actually compare prices with other shops, and we can go wider afield. It's not just for food shopping but also for electrical items we can go to places like Curry's, Dixon's and look around and we got a new oven didn't we, not long ago? I was always under the impression how expensive they were and well we didn't know where the shops were because none of them were in the local area. And when we got a car we actually started exploring other shops and thought well it's not that expensive, yes we can afford an oven, dishwashers, things like that (Nigel, Shopping trips, Paulsgrove)

This is probably the clearest example we have of the way consumer choice can change following an increase in personal mobility. Others households have switched stores for less specific reasons:

To be honest I like – I used to go to Tesco more but I've started coming here [Asda] more, I don't know why. I think when Tesco started to open 24 hours every time I went there the shelves were – every time I went to get something I wanted they didn't have it – two or three times that happened to me and I thought I'd come here, their shelves have always been quite stocked before. But by choice I'd go to Waitrose every day but it would work out more expensive (Joan, Shopping trip, Purbrook).

In general, however, our informants found it hard to imagine the conditions that would lead them to change stores. If a new store opened, most said that they would visit out of curiosity but few thought they would change for good:

Rossana: ...so what would happen for example if next to Tesco you had an Asda or Sainsbury?

Laura: *I'd probably have a look in there but I'd still carry on going in Tesco (Shopping trip)*

Similarly for choice within stores: most claimed that they would try new brands but with the expectation that they would revert to the brands with which they were already familiar:

Rossana : And why do you like Bisto?

Sheila: *Um, because mum used it I suppose and I've always used it! I've just followed and always used it! I've just followed on*

Rossana : So you didn't really try to look for another one and see the difference?

Sheila: *No – I think once I tried a different one but I found it wasn't as good so I decided no that wasn't for me, so I've always taken Bisto (Kitchen visit)*

Because they are so deeply embedded within the specific social context and domestic routine of each household, shopping practices are highly resistant to change, underlining the stability of shopping behaviour reported in our previous paper (Clarke et al. 2004a). A particularly striking example of this in terms of choice between stores was Paul and Wanda's response to our question about what they would do if their local Waitrose closed. Their answer was to go to another Waitrose further afield, rather than switch allegiance to a different supermarket nearer home.

Conclusion

The qualitative research presented in this paper allows us to 'thicken' the description of consumer choice that we offered in our previous paper, based primarily on the survey phases of our research (Clarke et al. 2004a). Besides the intrinsic value of such 'thick description' (Geertz 1973), we have also offered a different kind of analysis from the previous paper, arguing that some of the terms that are offered as explanations in conventional consumer research, such as 'convenience', 'value' and 'habit', need unpacking and problematising in order to understand their meaning for different consumers. We have suggested that consumer choice at this local level requires an understanding of the social context and domestic routines of different household. Consumer choice between and within stores is, we argue, strongly mediated by household context.

We would also argue that our research shows the benefits of combining quantitative and qualitative work, moving from extensive findings regarding consumer behaviour

at-store to a more intensive understanding of the factors that underpin consumer choice at the neighbourhood and household level. We argue that understanding the choices that consumers exercise between and within stores requires us to relate their at-store behaviour to the household context within which these decisions are rooted. Abstract arguments about consumer choice must, we argue, be grounded in a detailed understanding of consumers' lived experience in the local circumstances where 'real' decisions are made. This, in turn, demands an understanding of consumers' shopping practices and domestic routines, where ethnographic styles of research provide a valuable complement to more extensive forms of survey work.

Our study was designed in order that each phase of the research would inform the subsequent phases. So, for example, constructs like price and quality that were revealed in the principal components analysis of the neighbourhood survey data became the focus for later research at the household level. We are particularly keen that the qualitative research is not seen as a separate phase from the survey work, simply adding complexity and local detail to the quantitative work. There is no point in demonstrating complexity for its own sake. Rather, we have sought to argue that some of the constructs that emerge from the quantitative work (such as notions of convenience or accessibility) have limited explanatory value unless the very different meanings of these terms are related to the specific household contexts from which they emanate. To make sense of this complexity requires a deeper understanding of the changing household structures and domestic routines within which they are embedded. At the simplest level, our research shows that the qualitative dimensions of consumer choice cannot be reduced to class-based contrasts between residents of Paulsgrove and Purbrook. Even the poorest residents of Paulsgrove exercised choice in terms of their investment in quality and value as well as price, while some of our most cost-conscious consumers lived in the more affluent suburbs of Purbrook.

Our research also has implications for the way that retail competition is regulated. If consumer choice is used as the yardstick for assessing the effectiveness of competition within a particular locality, then regulators and retail planners will need to find new ways of representing the complexity and diversity of choice (as revealed in the foregoing discussion). For choice exists *within* as well as *between*

neighbourhoods and should be assessed at a more micro level than has traditionally been the case.⁴

Taken together, our two papers demonstrate that the effects of retail competition on consumer choice need to be addressed at the local (neighbourhood) level, where small social differences (in car ownership, for example) can result in marked contrasts in the choices available to spatially adjacent households. Our work shows how shopping is socially embedded within people's daily lives, as reflected in their complex domestic routines and household dynamics. Consumption choices involve socially-constructed notions of value, quality and taste (judgements that reveal differences in cultural capital) as well as more 'objective' notions of price, utility and physical accessibility. Choices are underpinned by ethical and moral judgements (doing a 'proper shop', being a good wife and mother). While shopping practices are routinised and habitual, they are not so far rooted in habit that they are incapable of change. Consumers are skilful, knowledgeable and reflexive subjects, evolving a repertoire of store choices to fulfil their diverse requirements. Future research, we argue, should place greater emphasis on consumers' household dynamics and changing lifestyles, relating people's choice of where to shop and what to buy to the stores they have around them and to their diverse domestic circumstances, daily routines and complex everyday lives.

⁴ The retail industry has traditionally used isochrones around stores to inform their locational decisions. Our research suggests that regulators might reverse this logic, basing their decisions on journey times from consumers' homes.

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