CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM AREAS IN FAMILY DECISION RESEARCH

2.1 Problems in Measuring Family Member Involvement
Before family-member involvement can be measured, the relevant universe of decisions and decision-related tasks must be determined. Researchers (including the present one) typically select decisions on fairly arbitrary grounds and ignore the implications of these choices.¹

What decisions should be included in order to measure family roles in a single product or expenditure category? What might first seem like an easy task becomes exceedingly complicated on execution. Consider, for example, grocery shopping. In one family, "going shopping" means walking to the store, picking out a "few things that look good for tonight's dinner", and returning home. In another family, "going shopping" includes preparing a detailed list, buying a week's groceries, returning home, and spending a half hour putting things away. Since the meaning of "grocery shopping" differs in the two families, so might the meaning of husband-wife involvement in this activity (Davis, 1976). It is only possible to interpret answers to such questions once it is clear what actual task the respondent is asked to evaluate.

2.2 Problem in Specifying Stages in Family Decision Making
Attempts to specify various stages in the decision making process are also subject to the same problems. Granbois (1963), as well as Davis and Rigaux

¹ As an example, it is interesting to note how frequently the Blood and Wolfe's (1960) measure of power has been used by other researchers simply because the study was widely cited.
(1974), employed traditional formulations of problem-solving behavior — i.e. problem recognition, determination of alternatives via search, and selection from among recognized alternatives. Gredal (1966) divided the purchasing process into a series of four gradual decisions ranging from the initial suggestion to the actual purchase. Specifically, she hypothesized a general purchasing or budgeting decision (how much money can be spent on individual items and how it is to be distributed among these), a concrete purchasing decision (e.g., “Let’s buy a new car”), a series of selection decisions (price, quality, brand store), and finally, a technical purchasing action (placing the order and picking up the product). Jaffe and Senft (1966) proposed an even more elaborate framework including information seeking (via people and media), a pre-purchase stage (initiating, selecting the type and brand, and budgeting), a buying stage (shopping and purchasing), and finally, a post-purchase stage (using and evaluating). All these formulations suffer from the same problem: they begin by assuming that household actually go through these stages. The fact that questionnaires are “correctly” filled out does not justify these questions (Davis, 1976).

2.3 Absence of Overall Measure of Family Decision Making Roles
Studies of household decision making should aim at developing an overall measure of decision making roles rather than limiting the focus to a single product category. While the objectives of such studies may be somewhat different, the problem of specifying relevant decisions is exactly the same. Families in different situations face a different set of decisions and tasks. A family with four young children (not an uncommon feature in India) may face an additional set of decisions not present in a childless or two-child or even a three-child family. It is of doubtful validity, then, to compare marital roles across families when the universe of actual decisions and tasks is not the same or the weights attached to the same decision are different (Davis, 1976).
2.4 Problem of Reliability

One problem constantly faced by the researchers in this area relates to the reliability and validity of the data collected. Earlier researchers have found substantial disagreement between spouses as to their relative influence in purchase decisions (Woodside and Motes, 1979; and Spiro, 1983). Burns (1977) reported that in certain cases husband was found to inflate his influence/involvement and/or authority in household purchase decisions and in certain cases wife was found to do the same or underestimate her influence. Burns and Hopper (1986) and Moore-Shay and Wilkie (1988) have found that significant disagreement existed in the reported relative influence of the spouses and this disagreement ranged between 10 to 50 percent of couples. Though a number of researchers (Gupta et al. 1982; Buss and Schaninger, 1983; and Seymour and Lessne 1984) have proposed several ways to increase the reliability and validity still this question is not completely resolved.

2.5 Over Emphasis on Husband Wife Dyads

Until recently research on families has concentrated on husband-wife dyads. Many studies only interview one partner, usually the wife and her responses are taken to represent that of the family's (Davis, 1971). Children and their influence on family decision making have largely been ignored. While some recent studies have included children, these have been predominantly been studies of triads composed of a father, a mother and one adolescent child (Foxman et al. 1989; and Kim and Lee, 1997).

Researchers have probably been guided by intuition in specifying the husband and wife as the relevant decision making unit for durable goods buying. Measures of influence become exceedingly complicated if more than two people are involved. Perhaps this may be one of the reasons why majority of previous studies took into account at most the relative involvement of two family members — generally husband and wife, altogether ignoring the role
played by children. It is also likely that the desire for comparability of research has tended to focus attention on the husband-wife dyad only.

Studies of family decision making have in reality been studies of husband-wife decision making. Little is known about household roles (including children) in information gathering and storage, product use, and post decision evaluation or about family-member roles across product domains. Hill and Klein (1973) have suggested that “scanty attention has been paid even to the descriptive questions of how and to what extent feed-back of information from past experience influences family decisions who evaluates the family experience, who ‘stores’ the information for future use, and who draw on this information storage when the need arises”.

Whatever the reasons, serious problems do exist. The relevant decision making unit is specified a priori by the research design rather than by the household. Parents, as well as friends and relatives, can also participate in “family” decisions. It is also possible that the relevant decision making unit varies throughout the decision making process.

The solution to this problem is not an easy one. Davis (1972) used information about who talked to whom regarding specific automobile purchase decisions as a method of verifying if the husband and wife were, in fact, the relevant decision making unit. The results showed differences by families and decisions. Husbands discussed what make of car to buy with other people as often as they discussed it with their wives. Perhaps families and/or decisions should be grouped into common decision units before the part played by each member is assessed (Davis, 1976).

Further complicating this issue is the fact that different measures of influence often point toward a different decision unit as being relevant. Turk and Bell (1972) found that children had power — sometimes substantial — when observational measures were used, but they had no power when the same couples were asked to provide self-reports of decision making power.
2.6 Relative Influence versus Total Influence
The great majority of studies make use of a scale that measures the relative influence of husband versus wife. This approach has the advantage of being widely used and thus permitting comparisons across studies. Bernhardt (1974) argued that such scales assume an equal amount of influence associated with each decision, which is then partitioned between husband and wife. In reality, a wife may feel that she exerted substantial influence in some decisions and little influence in others quite independent of the part played by her husband. Bernhardt proposed an alternative approach whereby each spouse first assesses how much influence he/she had and then how much the spouse had in various decisions. The result is a measure of both total and relative influence.

2.7 Varying Response Formats used in Family Decision Making
Researchers have utilized various response formats in order to measure purchase influence. Undoubtedly, the most common measure is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “husband decided” to “wife decided”. Some researchers have used a 3-point scale, which has the effect of increasing the expected level of agreement between husbands and wives as well as possibly altering the proportion of families that fall into the “jointly decided” category. Other studies further divide “equal-influence” responses into syncratic (i.e., always decide together) and autonomic (i.e., sometimes one spouse, sometimes the other) in order to obtain a more sensitive measure of the amount of role specialization. Influence has also been measured by asking each spouse to divide 10 point so as to show “share of husband and wife influence” (Haley et al. 1975). More attention should be given to whether these differing response formats yield comparable results.
2.8 Number of Respondents per Family
Two conclusions on how many family members to question can be supported from the literature. If the purpose of a study is limited to describing the relative influence of husband and wife in various decisions, it is sufficient to question only one spouse. Considerable evidence shows that the responses of husbands and wives are very similar when compared on an aggregate basis (Davis, 1970 & 1976). If, on the other hand, the researcher wants to use a measure of influence in subsequent analyses (particularly prediction studies) data should be collected from both spouses.

A related issue is whether children, particularly adolescents and teenagers, can be used as reporters. An early study by Converse and Crawford (1949) used college students to assess family-member involvement in 19 expenditure categories. Although this study provided no estimate of reliability or validity, Marshall (1963) reported very low inter-correlations when children and parents' reports about the child's use of money were compared.

2.9 Self-reported Versus Communication Measures
A lively controversy surrounds the issue whether influence should be measured by self-reports or interaction analysis. Research has shown that when comparing husbands’ and wives’ responses, global reports about “who is the boss” or “who makes major decisions” are less valid than product-specific reports (Davis, 1971; and Wilkes, 1975). Respondents apparently find it easier to recall decisions about specific choices and activities, particularly if a purchase occurred months or years ago. Even here the level of agreement between spouses in response to very specific decisions is far from perfect. Thus, a more fundamental issue regarding self-reports is whether couples can meaningfully think in terms of decision outcomes or power (Davis, 1976). In this context Kenkel (1961), has remarked:
“This assumes, of course, that individuals know the relative amount of influence they have that they are willing to admit it to themselves and others, and that they are able to recall with accuracy how influence was distributed in some past decision-making session”.

Olson and Rabunsky (1972) reported that individuals can more accurately report what decisions were made than who actually made them. It seems likely that respondents, faced with the tasks of answering questions that have little meaning, will respond in terms of what they consider to be the socially desirable role, namely, who should decide.

2.10 Problems in Measurement of “Power” in the Context of Family Interaction-based measures represent another tradition of research on family decision making (Strodtbeck, 1951; Kenkel, 1963; and Mishler and Waxler, 1968). Power is measured in different ways. Kenkel asked families to decide how they would spend an imaginary gift of $300. A spouse’s power was measured by the proportion of items “purchased” that were initially suggested by that person. As in the case with self-reports, these measures also have limitations. Bales’ (1950) Interaction Process Analysis includes nonverbal communication, which is undoubtedly an important indicator of power in long-lasting groups such as the family (Davis, 1976).

A number of sociologists have suggested that power and task responsibility are built into the roles of husband and wife on the basis of cultural norms and controls (Burgess and Locke, 1960; Parsons and Bales, 1955). Similar to French and Raven’s (1959) concept of “legitimate power”, a spouse’s authority is based on the belief that he or she should make a decision or carry out a task irrespective of the actual skills or interest that may be present. The source of a spouse’s power is thus external to the family. Power resides in the position rather than in the person. A traditional role ideology specifies large authority differences between husband and wife and a highly differentiated division of labor. A husband will decide what make of automobile to buy and
his wife what to serve for dinner when guests are invited, simply because these two decisions should be made by husbands and wives, respectively. Sharp distinctions are drawn between “things” that are masculine or feminine. This notion seems to be detached from reality.

2.11 Problems with the “Laboratory” Technique

The “laboratory” certainly has an impact on “normal” family interaction: it is a highly reactive environment. The simulated problems given to families by researchers also reinforce the artificiality of the situation. Zelditch (1971) has argued that one cannot equate a family’s laboratory behavior with the behavior of natural families. On the one hand, experiments remove many “place cues” that impinge on families in normal decision making situations. On the other hand, since families are more complex than the ad-hoc small group, it becomes difficult for researchers to study a single phenomenon isolated from other family processes (Davis, 1976).

Laboratory groups are generally studied under “ideal” environmental conditions. Members are rested, and meetings take place in rooms with good lighting, comfortable temperatures, and seating arrangements that encourage group interaction. Distractions are at a minimum. In the first place, families are often together when energy levels are low — early in the morning or late in the day. Little research has been conducted about decision making under conditions of fatigue although there is a good deal of folklore about the decisions of people “who can’t get started in the morning” or “who are too tired to think in the evening”. Second, family decision making is undoubtedly subject to distraction. In the morning, the demands of preparing breakfast, or the pressure to leave for work, interfere with concentrated problem solving. The evening contains many of the same distractions — dinner, TV, outside activities. Young children not only make constant demands on their parents throughout the day but also frequently interrupt the parents’ conversation.
Although no research on the effects of distraction has been done using families, a laboratory study by Wright (1974) is instructive. He found that distraction (a taped radio program at different volume levels) had the effect of increasing the salience of negative evidence and lowering the number of dimensions on which alternatives were evaluated. It does appear, therefore, that the environment can alter strategies used for making decisions.

Because of the long-lasting nature of family relationships, actions are frequently taken that assure continuance of the group. This contrasts with the ad-hoc laboratory group that exists for a very short period of time. In contrast to a committee or task force, problem situation may be viewed as a threat to the stability of the family, particularly if they are novel or have no obvious solutions. One manner of dealing with this situation is to avoid the issue itself and focus instead on group maintenance by minimizing expressions of conflicts and the number of alternatives considered. Aldous (1971) suggests that the emphasis within families "tends to be one of reducing the tension-laden situations to an innocuous level rather than submitting the problem to rigorous analysis of assessing the consequences of possible alternative strategies".

The solution to these problems does not lie principally in methodological improvements — i.e., using more specific questions, specifying the appropriate referent, reducing the lag between decision and data collection, or asking more members within the same family. More important is how decision making itself is conceptualized. It seems likely that measures of decision outcome (e.g., who decided or who won) tap a very different aspect of decision making than do measures of the decision process (e.g., who initiated the most instrumental acts or interruptions). In this regard, Turner (1970) has suggested that wives are often able to exercise considerable influence in family decisions while at the same time accepting their husbands' superior authority. This is possible because the husbands' authority and the
wife’s centrality in the network may be positively related; the greater the husband’s recognized authority is the fewer will be the direct requests made to him by his children.

2.12 Equating Purchase Decision with the Actual Purchase
Early writings often equated purchasing decisions with actual purchasing activities such that the person who went shopping for a product was assumed to have also made the product and brand decision. This view undoubtedly underlies the folklore that women control 80 percent of family spending. According to Converse et al. (1958), this “finding” was based on the rather unbelievable fact that someone once counted shoppers in a city department store and found that 80 percent were women. Manufacturers and advertisers have also found it convenient to look for one dominant spouse in each product category. The studies reported earlier, however, demonstrate again and again that family-member participation varies within each product category depending on what is being done or decided. From any point of view, it is a serious oversimplification to talk about a product category as simply husband dominant, wife dominant, or joint (Davis, 1976). Davis (1970) found 60 percent of couples classified as husband dominant for the decision about make of automobile but only 25 percent for the decision about color.

2.13 Variability of Responses
Husband-wife involvement for any consumer decision is likely to show considerable variability among families. Discussions of marital roles frequently understate the variance that is found even in the case of highly specific decisions. To illustrate, the Starch report (1958) concludes that:

“the husband, as the family ‘authority’ on mechanical matters, decides upon the make of the new family car”.
This conclusion was drawn from data showing that the husband decides in 61 percent of the families, the wife in 1 percent, and both in 38 percent. In contrast to the quotation, the findings of other studies indicate that the decision about make of automobile is not actually the exclusive domain of husbands (Davis, 1976).

Some variability is even present in product categories characterized by a high degree of role specialization. The survey by Haley et al. (1975) reports the percentage of husbands who made purchases of packaged goods during the preceding seven days and the percentage who actually influenced the product and brand selected. In none of the 87 product categories did husbands make less than 10 percent of the purchases.

Researchers have devoted little attention to explaining why, for the same decision, families vary in “who decides”. This issue will undoubtedly become more important as efforts are made to “locate” families having particular role patterns. Although a number of theoretical perspectives are available in the sociological and economics literature, these have not been systematically studied in terms of predicting purchase influence within families.

2.14 The Interrelatedness of Family Decisions

The typical problem dealt with by committees or laboratory groups is defined and worked on in isolation from other problems. This bypasses a number of questions relevant to the dynamics of family problem solving. Weick (1971) succinctly describes the differences as follows:

“They [laboratory groups] bypass such questions as how one comes to know that a problem exists, what it does to solution adequacy to be working on several different things concurrently with problem solving, what it’s like to go about solving a felt, intuited problem rather than an explicitly stated consequently validated problem which was made visible to all members at a specific point in time”.
Families face several problems concurrently. It is likely that among this set the most unambiguous and identifiable problems are solved first. This suggested to Aldous (1971) suggested that the problems which families actually solve are likely to be the unimportant ones. More far-reaching problems may remain undefined or unresolved. This is true for at least two reasons. *First*, a husband and wife may fixate on different aspects of the problem. A husband, for example, may see the automobile “problem” as uncertainty about getting to work on time or the cost of repairs. His wife, on the other hand, might define the “problem” as the extra burden of monthly payments or her husband’s infatuation with cars. Because they do not define the “problem” similarly, it may be dropped and not resolved. A *second* reason that can delay decisions is the impact, which each spouse’s solution has on the other spouse, either in the same problem area or in different problem areas. Faced with a limited budget, a new car purchase, for example, precludes new two-wheeler or refrigerator.

Support for these hypotheses is found in two studies. Foote (1974) analyzed data from a three-generation study (Hill, 1970) based on 120 grandparent, 120 parent and 120 young married families. He found both a high proportion of plan purchases that were not fulfilled. While Davis (1976) notes that in all generations unfulfilled plans and unplanned actions predominated over fulfilled plans and planed actions.

2.15 **Focus on Go Ahead Decisions**

Existing research has tended to focus on “go-ahead” decisions as a means of understanding family decision process; that is, having made or being about to make a purchase, families are queried about how this came about. Equally important, if not more so, are actions taken to abort or postpone consumer purchases given the interrelatedness of family decisions. Much could be learned about a household’s priority patterns and the influence of different family members by recording not only whose purchase suggestions were
realized but also whose suggestions were denied or tabled and for what reasons.

When analysing the influence that is exercised in the decisions that are made, the character of these decisions must be taken into account, that is to say, taking a decision with respect to a frequently purchased product is not the same as taking one with respect to a consumer durable or a service (Martinez and Polo, 1999). The type of decision being analysed will be a conditioning factor of the influence exercised by each member of the family (Martinez and Polo, 1999).