Family life in grocery stores – a study of interaction between adults and children

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Abstract
Today the family is seen as a unit for food choice and consumption. The influence of family members on food choice comprises several stages that can be carried out both in the private home and in the public sphere, such as the grocery store. This makes the grocery store a context in which ordinary family life can be observed. The aim was to study families and the interaction between children and adults in the grocery store, focusing on young people’s involvement in food shopping. Hidden observation and family interview methods were used. A total of 338 people were observed in seven different grocery stores in Stockholm during the summer and autumn of 2003. Seven family interviews, involving a total of 29 persons, were conducted in Uppsala in the spring of 2003. In the interviews, parents reported avoiding shopping for food together with children as they experienced it as stressful and exhausting. The observations showed that family life in the grocery store comprises not only the food purchase, but also bringing up children and consumer education. Young people’s involvement in the food purchase varied depending on their age and the specific product. The different behaviour observed may be interpreted as reflecting the variation in ways of bringing up children at home. Another conclusion is that a public place such as the grocery store facilitates pedagogical situations and can work as a tool for informal education.

Keywords Children, consumer education, decision-making, family life, food purchase, grocery store.

Introduction
The family as a consumer unit
In the material culture of the Western world, commodities can function as mediators of relations because people use these commodities in social activities. Food is a product for which this aspect is central. Thus, the concept of consumption is not only related to product choices, but also to wider structures of social interaction as seen in the family context.1 From infancy to adulthood, a large part of our everyday life is food related. The meaning of this food-related behaviour varies among people and even within the same person across different situations.7 Findings concerning the meaning and centrality of food in family life have been replicated in a number of studies.3–8 Besides its nutritional function, food can be used as comfort, reward or punishment.9 People not only eat differently, but also behave differently with respect to food, and specific meals have different meanings depending on the history and experiences of the person preparing or eating them.10

Within the family, during primary socialization, children begin to learn appropriate skills for food-related behaviour, which are established in the cultural setting.9 Management of food is a gender issue, as mothers usually manage the planning, buying and preparation of food eaten at home.3–5 However, relationships within the family determine the outcome of this procedure, as family members and their expectations and preferences most likely affect the home manager’s purchase and preparation of food.1,5,7 It is therefore reasonable to assume that food choice in the family derives not only from the preferences of a particular individual, but also from the collective. Individual food choice tends to be regarded merely as the result of the household’s external influences, such as friends, colleagues and advertising, but this view fails to explain how family members affect the food choice and habits of the entire household.11 In consumer research, the family household should rather be seen as a unit for decision-making and consumption.13 Family members, together with their communication and interaction during food management at home, constitute the consumer unit. As intra-household relations may affect food choice, studying food choice requires an analysis of the internal dynamics of domestic units.13
Children as consumers

Today, young people are an increasing segment in marketing and an important group in consumer research. The expansion in child advertising occurring during the past decades has had an impact not only on current child consumption, but also on future consumption, as childhood habits will affect adult behaviour.14,15 Furthermore, consumer research has shown the importance of children’s influence on the household’s entire consumption.16 The degree of their influence depends on type of product and whether the child is an end consumer.12,17,18 Children’s influence in decision-making can be direct (e.g. yielding, making suggestions or through discussions) or indirect (e.g. caring about a family member when buying food products). The latter is seen when parents cook food that is preferred by the children. However, the influence children have during a purchase varies with their age.19 Whereas younger children seem to yield, teenagers use other methods such as negotiating or making a proposal.

Children may introduce adult family members to food products and dishes they never would have considered trying or had an opportunity to come across.8 In turn, adult family members may modify their demands to make the task of providing meals for the whole family easier. In this sense, children can function as a resocializing factor on their parents, as they may influence parental attitudes and behaviour.10,20

The childhood experience of purchasing behaviour is part of consumer socialization, defined as ‘the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace’.21 As children grow older, they turn into attentive consumers, and with cognitive development are able to understand economic concepts and acquire the appropriate consumer skills that allow processing of product information. According to some researchers, the primary consumer socialization agents among teenagers are their peers, while parents and what is taught in the schools are less important to their decision-making.22

Food purchase in the family

Shopping for food in the western world has never been easier than today. There are supermarkets, corner stores and a growing market of 24-h openings. In Europe there are still small shops, however, they are decreasing while companies continue to establish super- and hypermarkets.23 In Sweden, the numbers of grocery stores have continuously decreased from 39 000 stores in the 1950, reaching a number of 6000 stores today.24 Specialist retailers, such as butchers, green grocers, fishmongers or milk shops, are rare in Sweden. Instead, most stores are small or medium large supermarkets. A few manufacturers dominate the Swedish market, with three main actors controlling 60% of it.24 This situation with poor competition is discussed to be one of the reasons of the high food prices in Sweden, which are 11% above the European Union average.24,25 During 2001 the average Swedish household spent 36 700 Swedish Kronor (about $4.75 11-05-2004) on the food purchase.26

During the last decades the food industry has changed dramatically from distributing and packing raw ingredients to transforming raw ingredients to pre-cooked or ready-to-go products. Instead of spending time on preparation, consumers are searching convenience products eliminating the effort of preparation and cooking as well as products with an added value.23 In a Swedish grocery store you can find anything you need, from meat to dairy products and vegetables under the same roof. Even in the same category of product several different brands are offered. The large assortment of products to choose between makes the food purchase a complicated process.

Before a purchase, the decision-making process follows a number of stages, but it is not exactly known how many stages there are or how these appear to one individual when making a choice. According to Lee and Marshall, the three stages – configuration, negotiation and outcome – can be considered in the decision-making process in families.16 Configuration is a phase of orientation, when making possible options visual and learning about the setting for the decision. In families, this undertaking can be compared to when making the rules of a game. During the negotiation stage the alternatives from the configuration stage are discussed among the family members and negotiated from their position in the family. The negotiation includes a variation of strategies, like emotional, expertise or like children’s yielding mentioned earlier. Eventually, the outcome of the decision-making pro-
cess of families represents the final choice of the family as a unit. During food purchase, the stages in decision-making can be carried out both at home and in the grocery store. This process is often unconscious and in many situations consumer behaviour is learned and internalized, and thus becomes habitual.\(^2\) The food purchase includes plenty of habitual behaviour – how people walk through the store and put products in the wire basket or trolley, waiting at the check-out counter, as well as the payment and packing afterwards. In the grocery store, other people as well as advertising, the time of year and time of day are examples of what may affect decisions concerning what to buy and eat. A shopping centre provides a synthesis of activities and in the grocery store activities other than food purchase can be observed. The shopping place is, according to Goss (quoted in Jackson), a place where ‘You have to create a safe secure feeling and make sure it’s not intimidating to anyone’.\(^1\) When family members go shopping for food, ordinary family life is thus relocated to a public place. This makes the grocery store a potentially good place for studying social activities and interaction in relation to food within everyday family life.

Aim

The aim of this article was to study family life and the interaction between children and adults in the grocery store, focusing on young people’s involvement in food shopping.

Methods

This study was conducted in the spring, summer and autumn of 2003. Two qualitative methods for data collection, ethnographic observations and interviews, were used.

Observations

Hidden observations of the interaction between children and adults were made in grocery stores by the first author. Attention was paid to all social activities in the store that included at least one adult and one child in any kind of interaction. The people observed are furthermore referred to as actors in an observed situation. At least two visits were made to each of the seven stores in the north suburb of Stockholm and in Uppsala. Small local stores as well as supermarkets were included, reachable by bike, car, public transportation or walking. The stores were located in different socio-economic areas and were visited between 11 AM and 8 PM both weekdays and weekends. A single situation could be observed for a period of 15 min to 1 h, depending on the observed actors. The observer acted like an ordinary customer shopping for food, which made her part of the social activities in the store.\(^27\) The observer, however, did not participate in the actual situation being observed and did not talk to the observed actors. As a consequence, the age of the actors could only be roughly estimated and it could not be established with certainty that the actors actually belonged to one ‘family unit’. However, by listening to the conversation, most observed situations could be categorized as involving members of the same family. Field notes concerning behaviour and body language, conversation and voice pitch as well as estimated age were made directly after the observations and outside the store.

A total of 127 situations were observed (see Table 1). To avoid possible seasonal effects on shopping behaviour, 80 situations were observed in summer and another 47 observations were made in autumn of 2003. This resulted in a sample of 338 observed actors. After analysing the first part of the material, the observations during the second phase focused on children’s involvement during the purchase, accepted behaviour and consumer education. Analyses were made by making interpretations of the observed activities, searching for patterns in the notes and categorizing the material into themes.\(^28,29\) The analysis from the interviews was then used to allow an emic approach to the activities.\(^30,31\) To simplify the analysis, the children were categorized into six groups based on their approximate age:

- Children aged up to 1 year: infants
- Children aged 1–2 years: small children
- Children aged 3–5 years: younger children
- Children aged 6–12 years: older children
- Teenagers aged 13–15 years: younger teenagers
- Teenagers aged 16–19 years: older teenager
Family interviews

Qualitative interviews were made by the first author with two-parent families to develop an understanding of their experience of food purchase. Families were contacted through a secondary school and the interviews were conducted during the spring of 2003 at the Department of Domestic Science in Uppsala. A semi-structured interview guide was used, and printed cards with food items and dishes were used to stimulate talking about food choice and food habit. A pilot interview was made with one two-parent family, with no further adjustments on the interview guide. Then another six families, with two or three children between the ages of 8–18 years, were interviewed. This made a total of 29 respondents.

During the family interviews, lasting for 1 h to 1 h 20 min each, a preliminary analysis was started. To avoid the influence of the interviewer’s pre-understanding and the respondents’ use of ‘cover terms’, respondents were asked to explain what they meant when using words such as ‘healthy’, ‘quality’ and ‘often’.

Each interview was recorded and video-taped to facilitate analysis of non-verbal communication. An analysis was conducted using the method ad hoc of Kvale. This was made through complementary methods as categorizing the material in terms of content, looking for patterns and finding meaningful explanations. The first author listened to the tapes several times during which a secondary analysis was conducted. As each interview was structured in areas including aspects other than the actual food purchase, only the part of current interest was transcribed verbatim. Quotations from the interviews that illustrated the observed activities during the fieldwork were selected to strengthen the analysis.

Discussion of methods

The observations were made in typical Swedish grocery stores and the results are thereby only representing the Swedish situation on the market. The interaction between adult and child may also be affected by cultural norms on behaviour. The family is an intimate social group, which makes it difficult for an outsider to observe, as one does not know the explicit meaning of words and actions used, because these are tied to the unknown background of the family members and their individual relations. Families and their members are continuously consuming together and as individuals, consciously and unconsciously. Consequently, the observed situations in grocery stores cannot be seen as reflecting general behaviour in the family consumption. This article should, thus, be seen as the author’s understanding and interpretation of family life during food purchase in Swedish grocery stores.

Observed situations could include all kinds of family structures, as well as only a few members of a family unit. However, the situations could also involve adults and children with non-biological relations. This was not considered a problem as the object of interest was any interaction between at least one adult and one child. Many of the actors observed during the summer seemed to be on vacation. This could affect how parents acted when choosing to shop with or without the children. How these parents would interact with their children when not on vacation cannot be determined. The second phase of the fieldwork, conducted in autumn, may...
have minimized the effect of parents being on summer vacation. Because one of the criteria of the observed situations was that they include at least one parent and one child, parents who deliberately avoided shopping with their children were not observed. This could also affect the results. Participating observation was not chosen as method as the observer should have become part of the actual situation and thereby may have affected people’s behaviour and the interaction between family members.

Two-parent families were interviewed to study the interaction among adults, including both mothers and fathers, and their children. This family structure was chosen because it was a part of a larger project studying food-related behaviour in two-parent families, a family structure that still is the most common one in Sweden. One part of the larger project deals with the food purchase and these data were used in this paper. Families participating in the interviews accepted the recording and seemed to be comfortable talking about the topic. The two-parent families can then be viewed as representing a group interested in talking about food and food habits. Thus, the interviews introduced ways to strengthen the understanding about how people feel about grocery shopping, which helped in analysing the observed behaviour during fieldwork.31,36

While the observations displayed ‘reality’ in a natural setting, the grocery store, the interviews can only illustrate the respondents’ experience of the grocery purchase.37 The choice of two different methods thereby seemed to be a good way of collecting rich and supplementary data. The observations confirmed and illustrated food-related activities in the store, which were discussed in the interviews to get an understanding of it on a deeper level.

Results

The following results are presented from the recurring pattern in the analyses of the interviews and the observations. From entering the grocery store to the final choice of a product, several factors seemed to affect the interaction between child and adult. It appeared that other social activities than the decision-making process was a frequent sight in the store. One of the major results was that the private family life, for example, parents bringing up children, informal education and emotional reactions like crying, seemed to continue in the public place and this was confirmed in the interviews.

Experience of shopping with children

Shopping with children can be a way to spend time with them, but it can also be arduous and time-consuming. Because of the demanding nature of such experiences, many parents avoid shopping for food with their children:

Sometimes you avoid shopping together with the whole family because they (meaning the two sons) fight at times, so it got to be a bit tough… and then you prefer shopping alone. (Mother, family interview 2)

Most observed families and parents were seen shopping at weekends, probably because the parents work 8 h a day and do not have the time or energy to go shopping with their children after work. In the interviews, it was confirmed that one parent may make the supplementary daily food purchase, like milk or fresh bread, alone after work and then do the ‘weekly shopping’ with the children at weekends.

Accepted behaviour in the grocery store – to play or to behave

Many of the observed children had no problem activating themselves in the store. They were seen running through the premises, playing hide-and-seek, diving into boxes of fruit or pushing each other around in trolleys. Accepted behaviour in the grocery store differed among families. Some parents did not seem to care what the children did, whereas others told them to stop. The situations below show variations in behaviour accepted.

At one supermarket free bananas were offered to children. Many children gave the impression of being well aware of this and ran to the banana baskets before their parents reached this section. It seemed as if the banana gift was something the children looked forward to and this made the shopping more fun for them. Some children took a banana without a second thought; others
asked their parents whether they were allowed to take one:

A young boy reaches the banana basket, shouting: ‘daddy, daddy, look’, looking at his father and holding a banana towards him. ‘Yes, you can take one’, the father says (Observation 7). Another young boy reaches the banana baskets but there are no free bananas. He turns to the ordinary banana counter and is going to take a banana from there. ‘NO, they are out, you must not take bananas from that counter’, the mother says with a serious tone. The son obeys and immediately finds something else to do (Observation 33). Later a mother and her two young children turn to the section. When approaching the fruit counters, the girl says that she wants a banana. The boy rushes to the banana baskets, but as they are out he cannot bring any to his sister. The girl starts to scream and cry. The mother then tells the son to pick two bananas from the ordinary counter (Observation 58).

In their attempts to help the children avoid breaking something, parents often discussed how to handle products and to be gentle, as the following observation at the vegetable section exemplifies:

A young girl is throwing red bell peppers around. She drops one on the floor. ‘Pick up the one you dropped on the floor’, the father says to the daughter. She does so and puts the pepper in the counter (Observation 71).

Justice is another topic children may learn about in the store. The following example shows a girl caring for her brother and being fair, although it also shows her fear of having to split a bag of candy with him:

A young girl is allowed to pick a bag of bulk candy. When she is satisfied, she puts the bag at the top of the trolley and asks her mother ‘Should we bring a bag of candy to John too?’ ‘We’d better since he’s not here’ the mother answers with laughter in her voice (Observation 70).

The observed situations above show the variation in families’ ways of bringing up their children, and these situations may reflect each family’s ordinary life at home, as internal norms and roles as well as relations in the family affect the accepted behaviour and how to become conscious citizens. The way of bringing up children can be compared to the configuration stage in the decision-making process theory by Lee and Marshall. This way of making specific behaviour correct in the store can be seen as the same kind of activity as in families setting the rules of a game, mentioned in the theory. Children need to know how they are expected to act and to behave as a proper consumer. In this stage, it is also shown the way cultural rules on behaviour in the grocery store are internalized.

Responsibility and involvement among children

Another application of the theory of Lee and Marshall is the phase of children’s involvement. During their growing capability, children become a part of the decision and can thereby have an effect on the outcome, although the observations showed clear variation in involvement among the children. Some parents spent a great deal of time listening to proposals or explaining things to their children, others were more distanced towards them and did not encourage any kind of involvement during shopping. The children who were not involved were seen playing around in the store while the parents made the purchases. The behaviour among the children involved in the purchase varied according to their age and type of product. When younger children were involved in the shopping, it was mostly through fetching products and carrying things, especially when the wire basket was overloaded. Younger children seemed to enjoy collecting fruit and vegetables together with the adults. Older children were often seen yielding in discussions about candy, lemonade and other non-food products found in supermarkets, for instance, candles, toys and magazines. Some of the older children were willing to help their parents make purchases, and girls in this category seemed to be more involved in the shopping than boys. They often helped by carrying or fetching products and were also allowed to choose products, especially breakfast cereals or fruit. When code scanners were used, a common task for older children was to guard the trolley, something that may encourage awareness of finan-
cial matters. In some situations, older children were not involved at all in the food shopping and were instead seen playing around. The observed teenagers were more involved in grocery purchase than were the children, either by helping the adults, making suggestions or negotiating about products. They also made their own decisions to fetch products and they could even put products in the shopping trolley without asking the adults. However, these independent decisions can be a result of peer influence on teenagers’ attitudes and behaviour, as was discussed by Kamaruddin and Mokhli.

There was no sign of gender differences in the adults’ behaviour towards the younger children, although there was one exception in the categories older children and younger teenagers, where the recurrent pattern of fathers asking for advice was noticeable:

A father and his old teenage son stand at the butcher’s counter. They discuss the barbecue they are going to have and try to find some lamb chops. The father is holding a package up to his son, asking for his opinion. ‘They look small . . .’, the son says. The father picks up another package, saying ‘This one is so dark’. ‘I think so too’, the son answers. Eventually they find a package they can both accept (Observation 6).

In the Swedish study by Wesslén, shopping for food was the mother’s task and when fathers and sons were shopping they needed a shopping list written by the mother. The observation of fathers and sons consultation during the purchase in this study can be a sign of their lack of confidence when shopping for food, but it can also be a sign of the teenager’s participation and responsibility in the food purchase. However, even if young people are involved in the food purchase, it is not possible to determine whether they are active in the cooking at home. According to Holmberg, purchase behaviour differs among families. In this study, the variation in children’s involvement is one indication of this. The parents who did not encourage involvement may not have had the time or patience required to explain to the children about food products while shopping. Another explanation may be that the differences seen during the observations illustrated family life at home, where food purchase, meal planning and preparation may be the parents’ roles.

Product choice – conveying knowledge to the children

A learning process was observed in many situations; examples of learning involved how to use a code scanner, returning plastic bottles, placing products on the check-out counter or packing products into bags after paying. The effort parent expended on this learning process was noteworthy in the situations with younger children. For example, children were seen helping to pack the food into bags – bags the parents then had to repack to avoid damage. When the parents explained why the food had to be packed in a specific way, the children learned to be careful in situations such as these. Older teenagers involved seemed to have the consumer skills needed to make food purchases, as one younger teenage boy demonstrated by cautiously packing the food in plastic bags while his mother was paying. The following episode shows consumer knowledge about brands and awareness of the value of money, which even quite young children appeared to have:

Two parents and their younger son stand at the breakfast cereal shelf. The mother picks a box of whole grain cereal with fruit. ‘Now you choose a box you like’, the father says to the son. The son immediately grabs a box of Sugar Pops from the shelf looking at his father. ‘Or . . . is there a cheaper one?’ he cautiously asks. The father looks at the shelf and says ‘There’s Signum Honey Puffs (a cheaper trademark) it’s almost the same thing . . . but it’s only a little cheaper, so – you can have Sugar Pops’ (Observation 64).

In Sweden today, there is a growing market of retailers’ own food brands, which are usually cheaper than the market’s leading brand, for example, Kellogg’s. This situation of numerous brands creates a need for consumer knowledge concerning the price and quality of the different products. Not only brand knowledge is needed, but also an understanding of how to handle the positioning in the marketing process, as children are likely to be more open to marketing appeals and thus need to avoid becoming vulnerable consumers. In a
study on Swedish teenagers, Wesslén writes that the skills and knowledge of food-related behaviour were things teenagers had learned at home and mostly by observing their mothers cooking when they were small. This way of acquiring consumer knowledge was also seen in the observations where children learned by asking parents about the name of raw ingredients and when they were fresh or ripe:

A family with two younger girls enters the vegetable section. ‘What’s that?’ the younger daughter says pointing at a vegetable on the counter. She does not get an answer and repeats the question. ‘It’s a radish’, the mother says. The younger girl asks the mother whether she can pick out some tomatoes. ‘Yes if you pick good ones’, the mother answers. The girl chooses one tomato at the time, showing her mother and asking ‘is this one good?’ When the mother has answered yes, the girl puts the tomatoes in a basket, which the mother is holding. The mother exchanges only one of the six tomatoes the girl has chosen (Observation 77).

Consumer socialization is an important phase in children’s development into consumers, as such knowledge is needed the day the children are grown up and are supposed to manage to live on their own. This conveying of consumer knowledge can be accomplished through easy information about what it means to make food purchases, thus through teaching children what vegetables to choose, what fresh fish looks like and the value of money. The consumer socialization thereby can be seen as the configuration stage in the decision-making process when and how to make the right choice. The above results show that the grocery store may facilitate moments of consumer education in many ways – not only by providing specific product knowledge, but also by giving information on how to handle and store food as well as on economic aspects of food. The observed teenagers seemed to have reached a level of consumer knowledge that may be deemed adequate this far, as had some of the older children.

Decision-making and negotiation in the store
As Coakley and Schlosser emphasized, the massiveness of marketing aimed at young children drives them to nag about products. Yet such behaviour was rare in this study, as these children had little success in this regard. The observed children seemed to accept when their parents denied them the product and did not continue to ask about it. The few observed situations of parent yielding appeared mostly around the bins of bulk candy. The rows of bulk candy near the check-out counter are a common sight in every grocery store, and it is usually a tempting sight for children. Here they can pick pieces of candy one by one and carefully select their favourites. On Fridays and Saturdays, children’s deciding about sweets was more accepted by their parents than on other weekdays, as ‘Saturday candy’ is a traditional weekly gift for children in the Swedish culture. On other weekdays, children could be observed nagging about candy without success. The following observation shows that children’s wishes are not always granted:

A mother and her young son stand at the check-out counter and the son looks at the bins of bulk candy beside the queue. ‘Look mum, there’s such a mass of candy’, the boy says. ‘You’ll have to wait until Saturday, then you can have candy’, the mother answers. The boy accepts and does not pursue his wish (Observation 118).

Sometimes during the shopping rounds, younger children loudly mentioned the name of one product well known to them to tell the parents they were interested. Another kind of negotiation was silent. The children did not ask to buy a product, but instead pointed at something they wanted or even fetched a product from the shelves and held it in front of the parent. An example of this is shown in the following situation:

A family with two young girls enters the dairy section. One of the girls sees fruit yoghurt on a counter. Among them there are the brands ‘Yoggi Junior’ and ‘Safari’ (both are positioned to children with cartoons on the package). ‘Daddy’, she says pointing at the yoghurt. ‘We already have it at home’, he answers and moves forward through the section. The girl does not say anything more about the yoghurt (Observation 77).
The observed situations also showed actors taking the wishes of other family members, being present or not, in account when choosing a product. This can be considered as a non-visual negotiation in the decision-making process among family units. According to the interviews, the influence of family members could also be a reason for buying something not needed in the household:

It was always those offers with three bottles of lemonade for 20 (Swedish Kronor) and there was some nagging and I said, if I can choose one, you (meaning her two sons) can choose one each too. (Mother, family interview 2)

According to consumer research, teenagers use strategies other than yielding to influence purchases, such as making proposals or through discussions. This was confirmed in the observations, where parents were seen to be induced by the teenagers through questions, suggestions or in dialogue:

A mother and her older teenage daughter stand at the bread counter. The mother says ‘have you tried this?’ showing her daughter a packet of whole grain bread. ‘No’, the daughter answers slowly. ‘It’s lovely and healthy – lots of fibre’, the mother continues. ‘That really doesn’t look tasty’, the daughter says laughing. ‘It’s got lots of fibre . . .’ the mother tries again. ‘Well, there’s tasty bread with fibre too’, the daughter says. They continue trying to find another bread (Observation 78).

Family members do not often share the same purchase motives, choice criteria or product preferences. Neither is the degree of influence constant across type of commodity, decision stage or several subdecisions such as the time for the purchase. This was confirmed in the observations, which showed both joint decisions made between teenagers and parents and different kinds of negotiation as mentioned in Lee and Marshall’s decision-making process. Individual preferences in the actual situation as well as type of product determined the outcome of the decision-making process. The age difference seemed to be an important factor in terms of the level and type of involvement among young people in this study. Children did not have the tools to induce their parents to buy, while teenagers acted more like knowledgeable and respected consumers.

Concluding remarks

Informal education

In the present study, the family has been shown to act as mediator of consumer knowledge in an informal way. According to Palojoki and Tuomi-Gröhn, there is a need for crossing boundaries between school and everyday life in order to promote learning in a societal context. While society is changing, teaching methods and pedagogical tools need to be reconsidered to fulfil the aims of consumer education. Benn stresses that ‘Consumer education must be a part of subject areas and cross-curricular projects’, meaning that there is a need to integrate consumer socialization and consumer education. Some parents in the study demonstrated that they could work to convey both practical skills and theoretical knowledge while making food purchases, as when teaching the child about a rape fruit or high-quality products. This informal method of consumer education from parents to children can furthermore be seen as the necessary link between theory and practice, and may thus be fruitful as an intervention in school and everyday life. Children and teenagers may also teach their parents about new products and introduce them to foreign dishes, as adults also need to update their knowledge in the changing society. This can be viewed as a kind of consumer resocialization, using the terminology of Ward. The consumer socialization and informal education between children and adults observed in this study thereby can be viewed as important not only as boundary crossing between school and everyday life, but also in terms of the passing of knowledge and skills between generations.

Children’s understanding of food

In an era of child consumers, niche products for children in grocery stores are an expanding sector. The positioning towards children can be seen in that products are placed at suitable levels and the package designs are overflowing with cartoons and other multicoloured fig-
ures. This was seen in the results when children were talking about a package or pointing at products positioned towards young consumers. Play is often seen as an added value and, thus, games and toys are included in the purchase to appeal to children. Other examples of products positioned to children are biscuits in the shape of animals, funny designed breakfast cereals, pasta miniatures and strangely flavoured ice cream. Though, most popular among the children, that is, the young actors in the observed situations, was the huge assortment of sweets, conveniently placed at the checkout counter. This way of creating products that appeal to children reveals the complexity of highly processed food. Coakley, who has explored the reconstruction of food products for children, discusses how the global market is reconstructing childhood by producing ‘virtual’ food rather than real food, by processing raw ingredients until they remind the consumer neither of the natural taste nor of the texture. Virtual food also makes it difficult for a child to imagine the connection between a processed product and the raw ingredients, such as grain and how it is grown. The virtual food, aimed at children, thereby causes alienation from the natural product. This modern phenomenon makes children’s involvement in the grocery purchase even more important, as they can learn about products through asking about, smelling, looking at, touching and sometimes even tasting ingredients. In this study, this was noticed in situations like when asking about a fish or the name of a vegetable and to pick tomatoes. Thus, the grocery purchase can help children understand the phenomenon of real food.

The grocery store as an extension of the home

In this study, it has been shown that the grocery store of today has become a part of the family’s everyday life and visiting it an everyday practice. Situations showing parents bringing up their children and how they were dealing with a crying or yielding child were considered natural behaviour that would appear even at home. The shelves and sections of the grocery store are also organized and experienced as the cupboard and refrigerator in the private kitchen. Thus, the grocery store can be seen as an extension of the home and thereby has become a natural setting for socialization with regard to food and food-related activities. Moreover, according to an investigation in the USA, stores are also designed to make the shopping experience pleasant for families. Among the frequent ways of making shopping family friendly were provision of play areas, special trolleys for children and diaper-changing areas. Such a friendly climate in grocery stores also reflects the creation of a safe place for family shopping. The design of the store also facilitates necessary pedagogical situations and the passing of knowledge between family members was a common view in this study. Another function of the grocery store is that it may offer opportunities to make children aware of proper behaviour and of how to act like responsible citizens. This means that, in modern society, activities at the grocery store have come to form an integral part of bringing up children.

Conclusion

This study has explored that the grocery store facilitates pedagogical situations in which children can acquire consumer skills concerning real food and how to choose the right products. The store thus turns into a place where parents can educate and socialize young consumers. Another result was that ordinary family life continues in a public place such as the grocery store. Numerous situations showed interaction between generations that were considered as everyday family life, among others the different stages in the decision-making process and parents bringing up their children.

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