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Conform or resist? Immigrant females and consumer empowerment

Introduction

Previous research has shown that men and women, within the family unit, have unequal power and, hence, ability to change the thoughts and/ or actions of each other (Olson and Cromwell, 1975). Consequently, the man has greater purposeful influence over his spouse and, therefore, ability to exert his decisions (Kranichfeld, 1987). Changes to women's economic status, including access to education, work, etc, has resulted in challenges to prior beliefs about the role and purchase influence of each family member (Commuri and Gentry, 2002; Xia et al. 2006). Consequently, increased women's power within the family unit has enabled them to challenge the family status quo resulting in renegotiating consumption decisions and expenditure patterns within the family (Lee and Beatty, 2002). This renegotiating may be resisted by the husband, leading to conflict and the wife exerting resistance through various acts of consumption.

This research explores how purchasing choices are renegotiated by immigrant women as they transition in their cultural roles from a wife within a patriarchal consanguine family to a nuclear family based on equality. In particular, by focusing on the immigrant wife we will illustrate how various acts of consumption offer these women not only a means to resist their husband's patriarchy but also assert their power within family purchases.

Background

Employment offers immigrant women opportunities to earn money, potentially creating a change in the dynamics of their relationship and the power balance within their family, enabling them to gain greater control over their lives (Dona and Ferguson, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford, 1999). Considering this opportunity for change, African male immigrants resort to traditional perspectives of gender roles, assuming responsibility for providing financial resources for their families, whilst the females are expected to maintain domestic chores in the role as the housewife (Daley, 2007; Ishii-Kuntz and Maryanski, 2003). Consequently, immigrant females are encouraged to take private, personal roles, with little control over their lives and frequently having lower earning power and status (Borak, 2005; Lee and Cochran 1988; Reid and Diaz, 1990). Yet as Noor (1999) notes, although immigrant men are agreeable to the idea of having spouses that are employed, because it increases family income, many are reluctant to share in household duties, leading to possible conflicts. Consequently, the immigrant wife's previous belief in patriarchy may now no longer be seen as a static construct, even within a group sharing similar class and ethnic characteristics, resulting in challenging traditional gender roles. This may then lead to renegotiating pre-existing rules and scripts that regulate gender relations, between husband and wife.

Vogler (1998) notes that although there have been numerous literatures relating the discussion of money, power and inequality within marriage, evidence suggests that it has failed to produce extensive understanding of how power operates within the household. For example, research by Barker and Robert (1993) identifies gender inequalities within marriage assumes power plays are an important casual role, however the concept of power is implicit rather than operationalised and investigated explicitly. More specifically research on money in the household operates within an explicit concept of power but tends to be narrowly

defined as decision-making. Previous work by Vogler and Pahl (1994) showed a link between the methods couples use to organise money within households and power and their sense of control over decision-making. However, Vogler (1998) later criticized this for not being based on a fully worked out theory of marital power, which explains, rather than simply describes, the empirical connections. The recognition then of the importance of money as a source of power represents an important aspect of understanding how marital decision-making amongst immigrants evolves, possibly leading to conflict and acts of resistance by the wife.

Should women then be seen as passive receptors of their male spouse's economic resources? The notion that changing economic resources can empower women within the family unit has been shown to increase the magnitude of family power exerted by wives (Eggebeen and Uhlenberg, 1985). Changes to women's economic status, including access to education, work, etc, has resulted in challenges to prior beliefs about the role and purchase influence of each family member (Commuri and Gentry, 2002; Xia et al. 2006). Consequently, increased women's power within the family unit may enable them to challenge the family status quo through renegotiating consumption decision-making process within the family unit (Lee and Beatty, 2002). What is not clear from previous research is the extent that this challenging of the status quo, within a married couple, by immigrant women leads to conflict, resistance and resolution.

Methodology

To understand how immigrant women's changing economic status affects marital purchasing choices, possibly leading to acts of consumer resistance, a qualitative approach was used to capture the complexities of the lives of first generation Nigerian immigrants living in Britain. Nigerians represent one of the largest African groups, out of a population of 485,277 Black Africans living in Britain (Office for National Statistics, 2010).

Participants, consisting of 10 first-generation Nigerian married couples (10 husbands and 10 wives) living in Britain were recruited from London and Manchester, exceeding the "suggested minimum of eight for generating cultural themes and categories" achieving theoretical saturation (McCracken, 1988, p. 17).

Participant interviews were conducted on a sequential basis. Each female participant was interviewed twice; first the wife and husband were interviewed to hear their shared story about life in Britain, their decision-making process and how they consume. The interview was then transcribed, notes written up and then analyzed. Following this process the wife was then interviewed separately, at a later date, with similar topics asked and clarification sought on points raised from the first interview. The purpose of this second interview was to partially note how female participant narratives changed (if at all) and explore the reasons why. This approach allowed for the identification of any perceived cultural subservience in their relationship and home.

The interviews were conducted by one of the author's who identified herself as a second generation female, Black, Nigerian. As this author does not speak a Nigerian language all the interviews were conducted in English. Interviews ranged from ninety to one hundred and eighty minutes, attributed to the emergent issues of being a Black woman in Britain but also reflecting on the time and narratives needed to ensure participant trust in the interviewer.

The interviews were transcribed, and the subsequent data analyzed, with the coded data sheets annotated to identify comparisons, metaphors and tropes in the data. Once completed the authors then compared their analysis, with particular attention given to the researcher's own cultural biases affecting the data interpretation.

(The term participant is used here on to identify the participant as a wife).

Findings

Setting the context - the Nigerian concept of the family, with the patriarchal male, providing for his family, was one that all the female participants actively supported. In many respects participants' willingness to support their husbands is reminiscent of Qualls (1987) observation of wives maintaining traditional gender roles. However, where Qualls (1987) describes this as a passive approach to gender relations, our participants revealed that their willingness to conform was not from a position of weakness. Instead conformity to Nigerian marital roles appeared to be selective, with participants reflecting on the financial power that their employment offered them. Complimenting this was the continued exposure to British cultural values of gender equality, which offered moments for personal reflection, motivating these women to question the current status quo. For example, Nicola stated '*Sometimes I find myself asking the question 'Ah, I'm a professional woman in Britain. I have all these skills, yet when I'm home I have to behave [in] a completely different way!' So you can see where frustration can set in.*'

The need for conformity - participants noted how some purchasing choices encouraged conformity to prescribed gender roles, reflecting previous research into conflict and resolution strategies. Sheth (1974) notes that family consumption decision conflict arises as a result of differences in purchase goals and perceptions regarding decision alternatives. In some instances participants actively sought out a resolution strategy in their decision-making. For example, Patience actively consulted with her husband over a sofa purchase, as he was expected to finance the purchase, indicative of Sheth's (1974) persuasion conflict strategy. Patience's recognition of the husband providing the finance is seen as recognition of his position within the family. In doing so, Patience satisfies her own concerns (purchasing a new sofa) in an act of assertive conflict resolution. In another example, Emma demonstrated a problem solving resolution strategy (Davis, 1976; Sheth, 1974) noting how an initial objection from her husband to a purchase a computer, was resolved through slowly reintroducing further information until he purchased the computer.

Resistance through necessity - the use of products as a means of expressing resistance and consequently renegotiating marital gender roles was often justified by participants by necessity. Husbands often worked long hours and household chores, previously deemed to be masculine roles, such as buying gardening tools, house repairs, needed to be undertaken. Consequently, the wife would organise and execute the decision to undertake these tasks, effectively using consumption as a means to assert not only their own gendered identity as a woman but also undermining the husband's patriarchal position. Amongst all participants this was the most dominant form of resistance that rejected gendered identities on products that the husband would normally purchase; for example, Sarah – replacing an old television set, Edna an replacing old computer, and Jane purchasing the materials for a new curtain rail and then organizing for builders to install it, effectively demeaning her husband's role.

Resistance through subversion: whilst resistance through necessity served to renegotiate marital roles, in many consumption instances the wife actively sought out ways to subvert the husband's authority within the family unit. In doing so, participants actively desired to assert their authority from a personal, family and wider societal perspective.

From a personal perspective, participants use of consumption as subversive acts of resistance ranged from products that asserted a sense of feminine identity (such as clothing and shoes, for example: Emma, Selina) through to white and brown goods (televisions, and furniture; for example: Nicola and Patience).

Acts of resistance that challenged marital roles often led participants to involve their children in their acts of resistance, effectively demonstrating the mother's increasing sense of authority within the family. Such acts ranged from publicly demonstrable (such as taking the children for an all day clothes shopping trip – Emma) through to purchasing high cost electrical products, solely for the child's use (for example, Edna – computer for daughter, Nicola – Nintendo DS for son). For example, Jane addressed her husband's perceived favoritism in the family by purchasing a laptop for her son, contrary to her husband's wishes, effectively renegotiating her position and power within the family.

In some instances, participants actively engaged in consumption acts that publicly challenged their husband's patriarchal position within the Nigerian community and British White society. Participants commented that within the Nigerian community there was a need for the wife to publicly support and reinforce her husband's patriarchy. Whilst this need was widely recognized, in some instances participants actively challenged this by purchasing clothes, without their husband's knowledge, that publicly demonstrated the wife's resistance. For example, Emma secretly bought a black dress to wear to a party within the Nigerian community, instantly dismissing her husband's negative opinion.

Resistance through confrontation - whilst participants' use of market generated products allowed them to subversively resist their husband's patriarchal authority, in other instances participants openly confronted their husband's authority. This sense of confrontation was not necessarily planned but the husband's reaction resulted in the participant publicly challenging and asserting her empowered position within the family. Whilst these acts were not as prevalent as subversive acts of resistance, they typically manifested around the production and consumption of food. For example, Nicola described an incident with her husband over dinner choice, dismissing her husband's rejection of the food by expressing her resistance through eating it herself.

At other times participants, empowered by their husbands to make purchase decisions, often went against their wishes, directly challenging their patriarchal power. For example, Shirley was requested to buy a specific set of wood-work tools for her husband, made her own purchase decision on which tool brand to purchase, contrary to her husband's wishes. Consequently, her husband demanded she return the tools, and bring the refunded money home. Shirley obtained the refund and then used the money to purchase herself a pair of shoes, again contrary to her husband's demands.

Resistance through hiding - In some instances participants' resistance was neither publicly or privately demonstrated but instead occurred quietly, without any intention of informing the husband. Such acts of resistance allowed participants to express their individuality. In the majority of participants this typically manifested in food purchasing and

production. Time demands and employment ensured that participants often sought convenience food, typically British food that reflected their husband's disapproval of equality and racism within British society. These purchases symbolically resisted the husband's demands that his wife, children and home become the embodiment of Nigerian patriarchal culture. Food for personal consumption then became an illicit means for participants to take ownership of their lives. However, one participant, Margaret, openly discussed and reveled in how she has over-ruled her husband's wishes to build a home in his ancestral village, instead purchasing and secretly building a house in the city of Lagos.

Discussion

The premise of this paper was to explore how marital roles are renegotiated by immigrant women through family consumption choices. Whilst Ishii-Kuntz and Maryanski (2003) found that African immigrant males view themselves as the provider was evident, our findings indicate that this role was only partially accepted. Instead our findings show that female Nigerian immigrants actively challenged, renegotiated and circumnavigated marital roles embedded within Nigerian culture (Kandiyoti, 1988; Lim, 1997). Our findings develop this line of enquiry further by showing how female immigrants use products to renegotiate power within the family, with even the most mundane acts of consumption becoming sites of patriarchal resistance. In particular, these findings suggest that acts of resistance appear to be motivated by opportunity. Acts of resistance transcended family roles, hence participants may engage in act of resistance towards her husband, or actively involve their children in an act of power posturing.

Education, income and age differences, along with social class did not produce notable differences amongst participants' renegotiation of marital roles. Instead, length of residency in Britain encouraged renegotiation of marital roles motivated by employment opportunities.

Why then did the female participants accept their husband's patriarchy yet offer acts of resistance towards this patriarchy? The answer lied in their acceptance of their shared experiences of racism and the negative consequences of racism on their husbands. All the participants acknowledge the pain and struggle their husbands experienced whilst living in Britain. Rejecting their husband's patriarchal role as head of the family would undermine their husband's authority and, potentially, undermine further their self-esteem, which had already been challenged by experiences of racism.

Acts of resistance then simply became a means for the wife to temporarily readjust the power balance in their relationship and renegotiate their compromised, gender, identity. Resistance allowed female participants then an opportunity to accept and acknowledge their own psychological and socio-cultural needs, even though they consciously reinforced a patriarchy that, from a Western perspective, may be deemed to be sexist.

References

References available upon request

