

# Pre-schoolers, parents and supermarkets: co-shopping as a social practice

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## Abstract

The objective of this paper was to examine the co-shopping practices of children and parents in supermarkets, i.e. the practical enactment of grocery shopping. Our special focus is on how informal consumer training occurs during parent–child interaction. We use observational data collected in spring 2008 in different Estonian supermarkets, post-shopping interviews with parents and focus group interviews with their children. Our analysis is informed by practice theory, which helps to look in detail at how the activities in a particular situation are coordinated by *understandings* and *procedures*, and are guided by the *engagement* in a particular shopping trip. Co-shopping interactions mostly revolve around particular material objects, although not exclusively. Product choice is a deeply contested area, where both parents and children face numerous pressures in this situation of two-way socialization. There are implications for consumer education more broadly. To accomplish lasting and meaningful effects on the everyday lives of families, there has to be a wider range of actors – supermarkets, producers, governmental bodies, schools and families – who care about both formal and informal consumer education.

## Introduction

Co-shopping – parents and children shopping together – is an interesting phenomenon where the everyday lives of families meet the commercial pressures to consume more, on the one hand, and ideological calls to consume more responsibly, to consume less, on the other hand (Halkier, 2010). This highlights parents' responsibility for guiding their children towards healthier, safer and more environmentally responsible lifestyles (Colls and Evans, 2008). Our contribution is to look at the practical enactment of co-shopping in supermarkets to better understand if and how the aforementioned responsibility is exercised by mothers and fathers, how consumers are socialized in the complex web of everyday life pressures, and what the implications are for consumer education.

Consumption by and for children as a research topic has been growing in importance and volume over the recent years. Attempts have been made to move beyond dichotomies that position the child either as an active, market-aware agent or as a vulnerable creature who needs protection, focusing on how competing pressures intertwine in the daily lives of families (Cook, 2004; Keller and Kalmus, 2009a). Numerous studies have also looked at parents shopping with their children in supermarkets (e.g. Petterson *et al.*, 2004; Wilson and Wood, 2004; Gram, 2010). Parents are often faced with a growing urge to consume, but there are not many strategies to help them cope with social norms, media and expert discourse, children's wishes, and the constraints of socio-economic settings in the process of raising their children in consumer societies (see Pugh, 2009).

Contemporary studies of children and media have brought to light new concepts of socialization (Buckingham, 2003). The linear development trajectory towards a 'competent consumer', where knowledge is primarily transmitted from parents to offspring, has been challenged (Roedder John, 1999). Children have gained importance as consumers in their own right, not as consumers 'to be', which is altering intergenerational power dynamics. Conceptualizations of emerging new forms of socialization – *reverse socialization* (Livingstone and Bober, 2005) and *two-way socialization* (Kalmus, 2007) – have entered academic discussion in recent years. The latter is relevant for our analysis because practices are transmitted both ways: children learn from parents as well as teach them.

In this context, we find it useful to draw upon practice theory to see how different aspects of co-shopping practice are connected and what is going on during the process at the microlevel (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005; Halkier *et al.*, 2011; Wahlen, 2011).

The main aim of the study was to explore how families are handling situations that are routine and mundane, on the one hand, yet emotionally, socially significant and normative, on the other. Specifically we map what constitutes different elements of the co-shopping practice and how these elements diverge for parents and children. We also focus on social interactions between children and parents, and seek to elaborate on how consumer training occurs during these interactions.

The study takes a closer look at how the practice unfolds through observational data collected in spring 2008 in different

Estonian supermarkets. This was complemented by post-shopping interviews with parents. Also, focus groups were conducted with their children.

Estonia has been a rapidly transforming society since its regaining of independence in 1991. A liberal market economy and openness to the West have made the globalizing consumer culture's influence particularly strong, especially on the young generation (Vihalemm and Kalmus, 2008; Keller and Kalmus, 2009b; Vihalemm and Keller, 2011). Studies have revealed that Estonian parents acknowledge their role as their offspring's primary consumer educators rather fragmentarily and ambivalently. Their attitudes are often protectionist, seeing children as manipulable. However, they possess few symbolic resources and behavioural strategies to develop children's consumer skills (Keller and Kalmus, 2009a).

### Understanding co-shopping as a social practice

Theories of social practice have in recent years been widely used in consumption studies, forming a 'fourth wave' of social scientific consumer research (coming after the first three waves: consumption as a function of economy, consumption as a function of culture and consumption as creativity) (Featherstone, 2007; Sassatelli, 2007; Halkier, 2010). According to the widely cited definition by Reckwitz (2002, p. 249), 'a practice is a routinized type of behaviour, which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge'. Schatzki (1996, p. 89) defines a practice in similar terms 'as a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings'.

Practice theory-based research stresses the routine and habitual character of everyday life, the collective nature of consumption and the difficulty of demarcating consumption practices separately. It is claimed that consumption is a moment in almost every practice (Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Warde, 2005). However, Warde (2005, p. 150) suggests that shopping is an *integrative practice* (see Schatzki, 2002) on its own. Thus, we understand co-shopping as a complex entity with constitutive elements that can be analytically delimited.

Another relevant aspect is the bodily and material nature of practices. It is essential to analyse how bodies are moved through the public commercially controlled space, how objects are handled and how all this relates to the interactions of co-shoppers. This poses many methodological challenges, making a multi-method approach almost inescapable.

Various authors have divided practices into elements in order to facilitate the analytic grasp of the complex flow of a practice. Our analysis follows Warde (2005), with a special focus on *engagements*, *understandings* and *procedures* that 'relate systematically to the activities (doings and sayings) and to each other within a practice and organize the practice' (Halkier, 2010, p. 30). In this model, engagements are mostly parents' and children's emotional and normative orientations and commitments to co-shopping. Our analysis of understandings is inspired by Gram-Hanssen. She distinguishes their two basic components: 'institutionalised knowledge and explicit rules' and 'know-how and embodied habits' (2011, p. 65). Procedures are instructions and principles of doing

something (Halkier, 2010). In addition, Warde (2005) also mentions consumption objects as important constituents.

Another relevant dimension for our analysis is the social interaction that occurs between practitioners. For example, Petterson *et al.*'s (2004) study of parents and children in Swedish supermarkets provides a detailed picture of interactions without using practice theory. Yet many practice theory-based consumer studies take social interaction for granted or acknowledge its importance while neither analysing nor theorizing about it specifically (e.g. Shove and Pantzar, 2005; Gram-Hanssen, 2011; Hargreaves, 2011). Halkier (2010, pp. 179–180) emphasizes the lack of clear conceptualization of social interaction in practice theory. She defines social interactions 'as open-ended inter-subjectively situated performances, enabled and conditioned by intersecting practical and social do-abilities'.

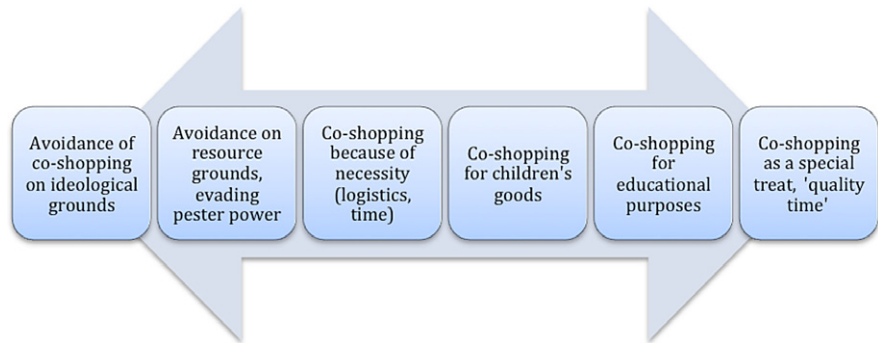
Practice-specific interactions can only partly be reduced to individual communication or parenting styles. They can be seen as both socially enabled and socially constrained activities, generated by a particular configuration of practice. Interactions between parents and children can also be viewed as opportunities for consumer education. In the discussion, we explore the implications of practice-based research for consumer education, which is in itself a set of communicative interventions meant to achieve behavioural change. We do this in line with an emerging body of scholarship that looks at the relations of practices and behaviour change initiatives (see, e.g. Hargreaves, 2011).

### Data and method of analysis

The data collection was carried out in spring 2008. Three qualitative methods were used: observation, semi-structured informant interviews and focus groups. The sample was made up of 10 families, including 11 pre-schoolers (aged 4–7) and 12 adults. The sample was chosen from a multi-aged kindergarten group in Tallinn (the capital of Estonia) and their parents. The families all lived in Tallinn and socio-economically could be characterized as middle class.

Focus group interviews were carried out with five boys and six girls. Prior to that, written consent was acquired from all parents. Themes discussed concentrated on shops, shopping with parents and objects desired. The talks were taped and later transcribed verbatim.

After focus groups, nine observations of supermarket co-shopping with the families of the interviewed children were conducted. Families were aware of, and consented to, the observer's presence. In five cases, a mother shopped with one or two children; in two cases, both mother and father were present (accompanied by one or two children). On two occasions, a father shopped (one with one, and another with two children). No interaction between the shoppers and the observer took place during the shopping trip. Notes were taken on everything children were interested in, what they did and what they talked about with parents. All interactions (both verbal and non-verbal) that were observed were documented in notes. Shopping trips varied in length from 12 to 45 min. Five of them took place on weekends and four on a weekday evening. Observations have been considered particularly suitable for studying shopping behaviour (see Gram, 2010), as well as interaction patterns characteristic to consumption-related teaching and learning (Ekström, 2007).



**Figure 1** Parents' engagements with co-shopping.

Immediately after shopping, the parents were interviewed in supermarket cafeterias. Children were present but did not actively participate in the conversations. The length of the interviews was between 18 and 40 min.

The initial analysis of the material took place in 2008–2010. Recoding and an almost entirely new analysis based on practice theory was undertaken in late 2011 and early 2012 because the research focus had evolved after the initial data analysis, which had not used concepts from practice theory. Data were recoded using categories from Warde (2005): engagements, understandings and procedures. To some extent, the category of *things* (in this case goods selected) was also looked at. The observation notes were analysed by coding each interaction situation. The latter were defined as any situation where either verbal or non-verbal interaction relating to product choice (or in rare cases other shopping-related matters) took place. Interactions were divided into two larger subsets: choices initiated by the parent and choices initiated by the child. Cross-case analysis was applied to find commonalities, as well as unique occurrences and enactments. In some instances, case-by-case analysis (especially with interview data) was used to describe the representation pattern of informants. Texts were re-read repeatedly, and open questions were posed regarding the material in a manner congruent with the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Also data from parents and children were compared and juxtaposed to find differences and similarities.

The following analysis uses practice elements as analytic categories, but it must be born in mind that understandings and procedures may in real life be inseparable. The methodological challenges of practice-based research are well covered by Halkier and Jensen (2011). The aim of our analysis was not to break the flow of everyday life into artificial pieces, but rather to use practice elements to zoom in on what is going on while shopping, and how it is understood by parents and children.

## Results: co-shopping as an intersection of shopping and parenting

### Intersection of practices

As several authors have pointed out, each enactment (see Halkier and Jensen, 2011) is often an intersection of multiple practices because each practice is tied to other practices (Schatzki, 2009). Co-shopping, at least for our urban middle-class informants, can be described as a situation that resides within a web of other practices,

such as transportation/commuting practices, cooking, household practices (e.g. cleaning and laundry) and most notably parenting. People constantly manoeuvre between these practices, and there is constant negotiation between reproduction and innovation. The following analysis stems from the premise that co-shopping and parenting are empirically inextricable, and we very much agree with Petterson *et al.*'s (2004, p. 326) conclusion that shopping is 'family life in a supermarket'. Our whole analysis proceeds from the premise that co-shopping cannot be viewed in isolation, situations observed in supermarkets were enactments of several intersecting practices, most notably shopping and parenting. However, household provisioning, cooking and transportation practices could be identified in the background, related to the ways parents and children made their purchases and interacted in the shop.

### Engagements

Emotional or normative commitment to the task of shopping varies depending on various time–space constraints and possibilities, such as weekday shopping after work or a more recreational trip on a weekend, as well as the necessity of buying things specific to children. Parents' engagements can be placed on a continuum (see Fig. 1): at one end there is strong aversion mainly because supermarkets as commercial spaces are seen as corrupting and emotionally tiring for vulnerable children. As one mother explained:

... I am not inclined to take my child along, for I find it is a pointless place, one where a person should spend as little time as possible. (Mother, Family interview 8)

On the other hand, parents view co-shopping as an informal educational opportunity or as a special treat (primarily on weekends), recreation and family time together, as illustrated by the following quote:

Weekends are a kind of family outing for us ... so that she can understand that it is a shopping trip as well, that we are buying something bigger so that she can look around and see the shop conditions or whatever. ... (Mother, Family interview 9)

Even though children have different things in mind, their engagements are quite similar to their parents' in broad terms. In our focus groups, the children pointed out that they felt reluctant to go shopping, the key reason being boredom.

I always start to whine. I'm really bored and then I cannot be bothered waiting there. It's hot and. ... (Boy, 7 years, Focus group)

On the other hand, co-shopping is a form of recreation and quality time for children, offering various delights, such as spending time with parents and acquiring new things, as stressed by one child: 'then you yourself can say what you want to buy' (Girl, 6 years, Focus group). Thus, it can be a complex act of bonding with parents because of being together or because objects bought for them are seen as gifts of love (see Miller, 1998). It can also be a search for novelty.

### Understandings and procedures

Co-shopping involves general knowledge of the economy, the workings of commerce and the procedures in a supermarket. In our case, it is most interesting to look at the understandings and procedures pertaining to choices of products for family provisioning in which children's wishes and parents' ways of dealing with them take centre stage. Understandings stem from internalized norms of parenting: based partly on personal experience, partly on more institutionalized sources (public, often media discourses about health, environment and child rearing). There are strong commonalities in understandings, which give reason to see them as inherent to that particular practice. For example, there are principles of buying local and preservative-free products or rules of 'one item for the child per shopping trip'. Also, parents claim that they try to avoid buying 'useless things' or items with potentially bad quality, as the following excerpt shows:

In my case it is like this: I rather agree to buy. Well I do not buy bad quality things. As the saying goes, I am not rich enough to buy poor shoddy things. . . . In the end, when it breaks, the child is sad anyway. (Father, Family interview 7)

Here we see that a popular expression underlies a general understanding. At the same time, this case reveals parents' habits and skills in handling children's wishes, which can also be interpreted as a procedure that is a mix of more explicit rules and experience-based skills. Thus, fluid boundaries are created between what can be bought and what cannot be – refusals and yielding to children's wishes go hand in hand. There is often a negotiation between practical do-ability and normative acceptability. More general ideological understandings and practical procedures of handling situations are intertwined in everyday lives. The background knowledge of the parent about some artificial substances causing health problems is translated into a practical enactment of letting the child choose from among a certain range of local soft drinks (which in their turn are believed to contain fewer additives). The child has repeatedly had them before and thus memorized. The following quote illustrates this:

He knows that he can have only those Estonian soft drinks, particular sorts, which do not have those widely-known E-letters, those that cause hyperactivity . . . and he knows, which they are, which he can have. (Mother, Family interview 5)

Many co-shopping procedures are related to saving time and money, choosing the 'right' products and, to a large extent, responding to children's wants and needs in a public place. This involves resorting to the accepted norms of good parenting (negotiation and dialogue, letting the child choose, self-assertion, etc.) or at least considering them. For example, where there are perceived time pressures, parents preferred a familiar shop. Also,

it was deemed crucial to be determined, and know in advance, what one wanted:

In a shop, I think your concentration is the greatest; if you know what you want, then you follow a very clear trajectory . . . if you start looking around, then the child starts to look around even more. And the child wants the things he sees much more than a grown-up does. Pester power can be controlled with your own determination. (Mother, Family interview 7)

Although the earlier extract does not reveal much explicitly discursive teaching, it can be understood as the mother embodying an example of non-distracted, 'determined' and thus efficient shopping. She describes her physical movement in the shop and a pre-calculation of what has to be purchased on a particular shopping trip. Thus, transmitting a way of doing acceptable co-shopping practice to her child is a web of mental and bodily procedures. In another interview, a father expressed a similar idea of efficient personal example-based time use training, combined with explicit verbal discussion of the shopping list prior to physically entering the shop. Thus perhaps 'knowing in advance' is viewed as a sort of immunization against the allures of the commercial space of the supermarket:

Usually I know when stepping out of the car, what I want to buy and I try to explain them too. . . . You must think in advance what you want . . . when we come shopping together, then we discuss already in the car, what to buy. (Father, Family interview 1)

Parents evaluate themselves as aspirers, who sometimes are successful and sometimes fail. Thus the learning and teaching process is a mutual, pointing to the two-way socialization concept (Kalmus, 2007). Parents see themselves as responsible for socializing children as consumers and, at the same time, contend that co-shopping (as well as child rearing in general) transforms them both as parents and as consumers. Yet, while the informants construct a rather coherent narrative of themselves as parents attempting to transmit a mix of acceptable conduct as well as ideological values (such as healthy eating, sharing with siblings and the like) in the interviews; actually observed shopping enactments are much 'messier'. Parents evidently have to negotiate practical acceptability and manageability of the situation on the procedures level, as well as more general understandings of product selection, family relations, etc.

One situation of product choice noticed in an observation and reflected upon in the subsequent interview is revealing. A girl took a bag of Skittles sweets, which ignited an elaborate negotiation process by the mother, who offered many different types of sweets in exchange, all locally produced, using various arguments (related to the toys in Kinder Surprise eggs, a potential row with the sister, etc.), but the child kept refusing. Finally, marshmallows were bought (the child's choice) but in a large and cheaper-per-item bag (mother's decision). The father, standing by, asked rather dryly if the mother was so yielding because the 'lady was watching' (referring to the observer, who had been standing at a short distance). The child was almost silent, uttering only briefly 'Don't want to . . .', shook her head, looked around and picked a new item. It is notable that all this happened by the bottom shelf of the sweets area. In an interview, the mother offered the following explanation for this rather uniquely long negotiation:



**Figure 2** Constitution of the practice of co-shopping.

Well I generally try to find . . . well I try to buy Kalev sweets. Sometimes I succeed, and sometimes not. Today, for example, I did not. Usually I succeed in seducing them with Pilveke or Draakon<sup>1</sup>, so that they do not buy, what are they . . . Skittles or the like. / . . . / Well with Kalev sweets it is good that the packages contain a lot. And they are good and tasty and the little sister can eat them . . . that they both can share it . . . it is good then . . . but with juice I usually choose a Lotte or something. I steer them to Lotte<sup>2</sup> or Limpa<sup>3</sup>; we say 'see this is a Limpa or Lotte straw drink; this is so good to drink' . . . but . . . Coca Cola we try to avoid. Try. (emphasis). (Mother, Family interview 4)

Thus, the situation highlights the mother's efforts at offering choice, guiding it in a healthier, more rational and relationally (sister) acceptable direction. It is a complex web of understandings (product origin, health, brand symbolism, financial concerns and family relations), procedures (e.g. the broken rule of Kalev sweets, and dialogue with a child in a public place in a potentially explosive situation), engagements (the trip as a negotiation, child rearing and family provisioning), and material items and arrange-

ments (the particular product choice and spatial display; see Fig. 2).

### Parent-child interaction: transmission of practice

Transmission of practice is a continuum (see Fig. 3), ranging from unreflected co-shopping, where the child is present but not actively involved, to conscious teaching, when various aspects of the practice are conveyed to the child. Interactions contain both *sayings* (verbal) and *doings* (material and embodied). The latter is especially evident in the case where parents demonstrate how things are done (e.g. harder items at the bottom of the bag and softer items at the top). These patterns are partly dependent on individual communication styles, family habits and relations, but, on the other hand, they are social and supra-individual, generated by practice, or rather by the intersection of shopping and parenting practices in the given case.

Based on the observation data, an outline of different interactions between parents and children has been devised (see Fig. 4). Most of these interactions focus on choosing products, initiated either by the parent or by the child. There is a particular range of objects that children are especially keen on in the supermarket (sweets, soft drinks, toys and magazines), which evoke refusals and sometimes negotiations. An overlap area between 'children's products' and 'parents' products' of breakfast cereals, juices, biscuits, frankfurters, cheese and the like is often the territory where children can fill the cart with parents' tacit agreement or are

<sup>1</sup>'Pilveke' and 'Draakon' are Estonian locally produced sweets that are, on various grounds, health related and, on ideological grounds, considered better alternatives to many other sweets by parents.

<sup>2</sup>'Lotte' is a well-loved animated character (a dog) in Estonian children's films, which is used in co-branding by various products, including mobile phones, socks, shampoo, etc.

<sup>3</sup>'Limpa' is a commercial character (a piglet) used by a soft drink producer to promote one of its drinks for children.

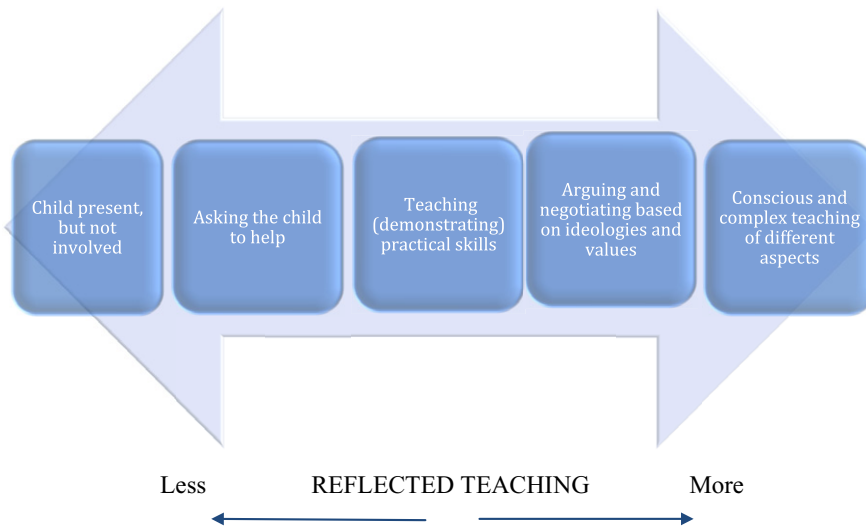


Figure 3 Different types of teaching.

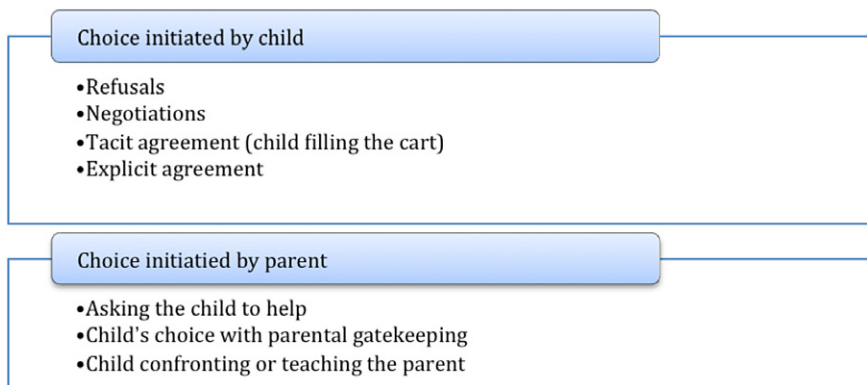


Figure 4 Types of interactions between parents and children during co-shopping.

allowed to select on their own within preset boundaries. Fruits and vegetables are interesting categories. As a whole it is deemed healthy and acceptable, so parents tend to see this section in the supermarket as a fertile ground for teaching because children run into difficulty making their choices here. As the observations show, parents demonstrate how to test the quality and freshness and ripeness of fruits and vegetables, which involves bodily procedures of touch, vision and smell as well as verbal explanations.

When refusing, parents resort to such standard arguments as ‘too expensive’, ‘useless/shoddy’ and ‘you do not need it’. As children in the focus groups mention, the utility argument often goes together with the financial argument. Children seem to be bored by the repetitive use of those grounds for refusal and not particularly eager to accept them.

Because these things are pointless in their opinion . . . and some things are too expensive and for her those games are simply pointless. I don’t know why. Some mothers have it like this. . . that they say this thing is pointless. (Boy, 7 years, Focus group)

Children were often not persuaded by parents’ justifications (if there were any) or they saw other motives behind pre-texts.

. . . he always gives the same silly answer: this is too expensive, this is too expensive. They say it so that we will not want any toys from the shop, because we have too many toys already. (Boy, 7 years, Focus group)

In the shop observations, a rich armamentarium of ways of refusing and negotiating by parents emerged, which combined verbal declining with bodily movements. The sayings embrace situation-specific phrases like ‘this is not on our list’ (Father and child: girl, 6 years; Observation 7); ‘this is for small children’ (Mother and child: boy, 5 years; Observation 9); ‘this drink is too sweet’ (Mother and child: boy, 6 years; Observation 2); ‘we will not buy today, but we will for birthday’ (Mother and child: boy, 5 years; Observation 9) ‘you cannot have what you wish every time, only sometimes’ (Mother and child: boy, 6 years; Observation 2; Mother and child: girl, 4 years; Observation 4; Father and child: girl, 6 years; Observation 7). The actions (or doings in Schatzki’s terminology) can involve movement away from a specific product display or category, thus physically drawing the children’s attention away from a particular commercial space or arrangement that has caught their eye often combined with attempts to divert attention towards some other product display, which could be deemed more acceptable for the parent (e.g. trying to negotiate the child into buying a colouring book instead of a magazine). Physical ‘refusal’ to yield to the child’s purchase initiative can also mean grabbing the item, taken by the child, out of the basket and placing it back on the shelf, thus making the already chosen object (on its way to personalization and appropriation) anonymous and ‘not our own’ again.

If purchases are turned down on health grounds, little explanation, if any, is given. A father reacted to a ketchup selection by his daughter with the exclamation: 'This is horrible!' The child asked if it was spicy, but the father replied that it was full of preservatives, without further explication (Father and child: girl, 6 years; Observation 7). This seems to be part of the acceptable way of doing co-shopping, which involves buying specific things, within the limits of what is deemed healthy and financially affordable, yet interlaced with time constraint and parental authority. Also, it must be born in mind that, in most cases, pre-school children are not cognitively mature enough to elaborate on or understand complex arguments and explanations. Thus the curt, often repeated phrases accompanied with bodily movements of product 'dodging', that parents apply to substantiate and perform buying, or not buying, are the 'shortcuts' to competently accomplish the everyday co-shopping in all its complexity.

Although not yielding to nagging and 'controlling pester power' seem to be important components of the co-shopping practice on all levels – understandings, procedures and engagements – the teaching and child rearing during shopping trips are not only about negotiations and refusals. There are various ways of parent–child cooperation, which can also be seen as enactments of practice transmission, that vary on a continuum from reflected and conscious teaching to unreflected bodily movements that are done in the child's co-presence.

Asking for help from children is situation specific. Helping as a category emerged vividly in the children's focus groups as well. It can be more physical and spontaneous, such as fetching something, as one child describes:

... yes, I go to this cold place, where fruits and vegetables are, then I put them onto a thing and press a button and then something comes out of there and then I stick it on. (Boy, 6 years, Focus group)

Or assisting can be a more 'staged' event by the parent, as when the child is asked to read the shopping list out loud, while the parent picks items (which can also be a reading exercise for a pre-schooler).

Although a parent's leading role and power position – which is constantly negotiated in problematic situations – is inherent to the co-shopping practice, it is also a dialogic process, in which children can teach their parents, as well as resist or correct them. For example, when a father proposed to buy milk, the daughter responded that there was milk at home (Father and children: girl, 5 years; boy, 7 years; Observation 1). Or another child replied 'Sweets make a stomach bad' to her mother's suggestion of buying biscuits (Mother and child: boy, 5 years; Observation 9). From these fragments, we see the activation of children's other practices (perhaps cooking or eating at home, or even a pre-shopping refrigerator check), as well as broader knowledge about the effect of sweets, which can be both a practical understanding from personal experience and something heard from the parents earlier, on the television or in kindergarten.

## Concluding discussion

Our analysis concentrates on the elements of the practice of co-shopping, as well as on parent–child interactions. In our analy-

sis we have focused more on teaching and less on learning because our empirical data provided no exact evidence of how much was internalized by children in the situations observed. However, children's general knowledge of shopping and their emotional orientations (engagements) could be mapped.

During the shopping situation, the logic of the practice seems to generate the following sequence: either the child or the parent initiates the choice of a commodity and the other party has to respond. The sayings and doings in a particular situation are coordinated by understandings (e.g. about family relations, the product's impact on health or financial matters), procedures (use of a shopping list, negotiations, one-item-per-child rule, etc.) and engagements in a particular shopping trip (whether a short after-work provisioning trip or a family outing on a Sunday). Co-shopping interactions mostly revolve around particular material objects, although not exclusively (e.g. parents can instruct their children more generally about how to behave in a shop).

Product choice is a deeply contested area where both parents and children face numerous pressures in the situation of two-way socialization. Here various implications for consumer education emerge and a practice-based detailed insight into how co-shopping occurs can provide inspiration for further elaboration of consumer education possibilities, both on the informal everyday level and within formal education.

Institutionalized knowledge (which seems to form the crux of formal consumer education) is only one avenue for behavioural change. To accomplish lasting and meaningful effects in the everyday lives of families, a wider range of actors (supermarkets, producers, governmental bodies and schools) need to be involved in formal and informal consumer education (see also Colls and Evans, 2008), for whom healthier and safer consumer lives are a priority. The choice of goods is by no means only individual, rational and cognitive; it is also socially enabled and constrained, relational, material and embodied, as well as bound to time and space. Environmental design thinking, which is the application of design principles to create people-centred solutions to life problems, is a promising idea in this context (Schwartz, 2012). In addition, producers and sellers need to contribute to providing healthier and higher quality products, as well as product displays at children's eye level or in front of the cash register that induce healthier and more responsible choices. We believe that these complex and concerted efforts might deliver better results in the long run than educational or communicative interventions alone, which primarily seek to provide information or influence people's values and attitudes, leaving children and parents more or less alone in the face of a powerful commercial world that pulls in an opposite direction to consumer education.

As could be seen in co-shopping situations, although parents acknowledge themselves as the main consumer skills' teachers for their offspring, consumer training situations in co-shopping processes usually unfold unexpectedly and parents are not well prepared to handle all situations. However, we believe that if parents received more support from producers and sellers, they would be more motivated to use shopping trips more reflectively as educational opportunities, where a young child can exercise choice, practice various skills and acquire knowledge, supporting the child's overall active agency. Not only do the routines of families shopping need to be unfrozen, but also those of producers, wholesalers, supermarkets and others.

Here, parallels emerge with recent challenges by McGregor (2012) to neoclassical economic theory-inspired consumer education from the vantage point of complexity economics. McGregor (2012, p. 68) stresses 'complexity, change and evolution, adaptation, self-organization, emergence, non-equilibrium, chaos and tensions, patterns and networks, and holistic, synergistic interconnections and relations between individual and aggregate agents'. This highlights on the macrolevel many of the same tenets as social practice theory targets on the microlevel. Further research is needed to show how the understandings of complexity, both in large-scale social systems, such as the economy, and in the everyday lives of consumers can be synergized and complemented through consumer education efforts.

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