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# CASES IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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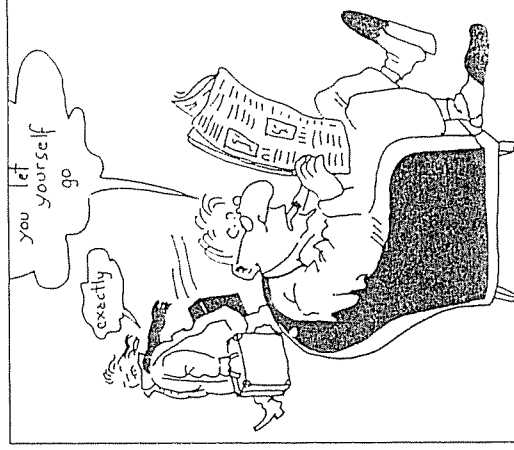
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# THE CASE OF THE MODEL RAILWAY PURCHASE

Erich Kirchler and Christa Rodler  
*University of Vienna*



## 5.1 A very ordinary couple!

People in private households make decisions when they are still groggy in the morning or tired again in the evening after a day's work. Economic decision making is imbedded in the daily routine of a relationship, which is faced with a multitude of different decision topics which often do not present themselves one after the other but rather demand simultaneous

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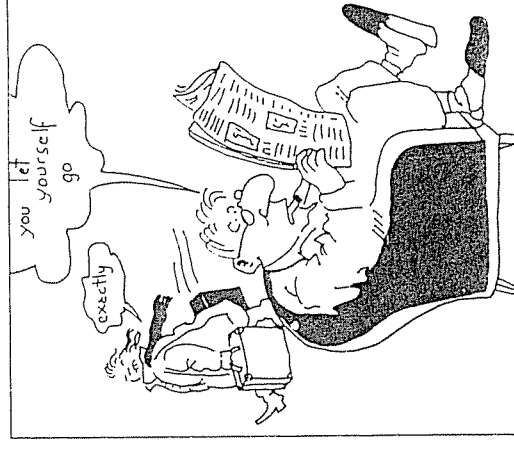
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# THE CASE OF THE MODEL RAILWAY PURCHASE

Erich Kirchler and Christa Rodler  
*University of Vienna*



## 5.1 A very ordinary couple<sup>1</sup>

People in private households make decisions when they are still groggy in the morning or tired again in the evening after a day's work. Economic decision making is imbedded in the daily routine of a relationship, which is faced with a multitude of different decision topics which often do not present themselves one after the other but rather demand simultaneous

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solutions. Under such conditions, an abundance of decisions are not made properly and some problems remain unresolved. Members of the private household may take 'out of the stream events' an unresolved decision at a later stage, discuss the issue again and either find a solution or jump to another topic. The unresolved topic may be forgotten or somebody may return to it at a later point in time (Kirchler, 1995). At later stages, the preferences, alternatives and also the initial part of the decision may have changed as is illustrated in the following case drawn from the diaries of Mary and Peter.

Mary and Peter have been married for 17 years. Peter is 43, his wife Mary is 36 years old. They live in an apartment in the suburbs of Vienna together with a 15-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter. Peter works for the federal railways, Mary has a full time job as a secretary in a law firm. Their relationship is characterized by them as highly satisfying, and husband-dominated with a traditional role orientation. The couple organizes their household finances by pooling their income.

Peter and Mary have to make a rather ordinary decision about the purchase of a birthday present for their 15-year-old son. The case of the couple's experiences during the course of the purchase decision will be drawn from the diary reports which were collected in a long term diary study, the Vienna Diary Study (Kirchler, Rodler, Hölzl and Meier, 1998).

## 5.2 The Vienna diary study

Forty couples were instructed to fill out a structured diary every evening during one year. The partners had first to go back over together the day just ended, considering, in retrospect, the conversations they had with each other. They then had to decide between them which conversations led to differences of opinion. Finally, they had to fill out separately the questions in the diary describing the conversations which they had had during the day: questions relating to conversations in general, relationship quality, about investment of resources and autonomous decisions (page 1 of the diary). On page 2 of the diary, the subjects had to answer questions about disagreements. The interaction situation was described, and questions answered about the relative competence of the partners, the relative importance of the decision and the money at stake, the communication climate, the style of argument, degree of influence on the other, fairness, relative profit, influence tactics, happiness with the outcome, and so on.

In Figure 5.1, a day's diary sheet, as it was filled out separately by Peter and by Mary, is depicted. By examining the diary sheets, we are able to reconstruct the course of the decision.

*Sunday, 27 October 1996:* On that day, Mary and Peter spend about four hours together, a total of one hour of which in conversation. They had talked about the father's and son's visit to a model railway fair and about housework. They spoke about their relationship with each other, which was described as 'gloomy' – 'icy', and their daughter, who complained about unfair treatment. They started quarrelling about their relationship with each other. Peter described her as narrow-minded and Mary said that he could be egotistic. An expenditure for a model locomotive which cost 2,300 ATS (euro 168) was also at stake. The husband reported on an autonomous decision: he had bought the locomotive model for him and his son that day. This was also the topic of a disagreement, which was discussed during the family's mealtime when the children were present. One of the children had brought up the subject. It was not the first time the partners had talked about this subject and both thought that they knew a lot about it. The matter of the railway purchase was more important to Peter than to Mary. The emotional climate during the talk was not very pleasant and the wife's conversation style was described by both spouses as rather subjective. Mary reported that she had no influence at all, Peter thought she had about 40% of the influence on the decision while he had 60%. Unlike Peter, Mary felt that the decision procedure was unfair and so also was the decision outcome. This is also expressed in the way Mary described the topic on which the spouses disagreed: she registered in the diary that expenditure of 2,300 ATS (euro 168) for the model railway was at stake and he had bought the model railway without consulting her. Both agreed that Peter had all the profit out of this purchase. Besides this information, the diary informs about the influence tactics the partners used to influence each other during their talk. She said that she had tried to exert influence by threatening to withdraw resources (tactic 6), then she just insisted

Table 5.1 List of influence tactics in household decisions

1 Positive emotions	2 Negative emotions
3 Helplessness	4 Physical force
5 Offering resources	6 Withdrawing resources
7 Insisting	8 Leaving the scene
9 Over information	10 Distorted information
11 Indirect coalitions	12 Direct coalitions
16 Trade-offs	17 Integrative bargaining
18 Reason	
13–15 Tactics not applicable for joint decision making (buying autonomously, buying versus yielding due to role segmentation)	

Page 1: Wife's report

Page 1: Wife's report

Date: 27.10.1996 Time: 22:00 pm Place: At home

1 Did you talk to your partner today?  no  yes

How long have you been together? 240 minutes

How long did you talk to each other? 60 minutes

2 Did you talk about the following topics?

Did you agree about the topic? (yes, no)

(a) Expenditures for Railway model engine: 2300 ATS  completely  not at all

(b) Savings (term)  completely  not at all

(c) Money matters  completely  not at all

(d) Work (job)  completely  not at all

(e) Homework Laundry, clean up  completely  not at all

(f) Myself/partner He is egotistic  completely  not at all

(g) Relationship "gloominess"  completely  not at all

If you did not talk to your partner today or if you had no disagreements, the questions end here

(h) Children Daughter feels unfairly treated  completely  not at all

(i) Friends / Relatives Telephone call  completely  not at all

(j) Leisure time / hobby / journey / vacation / sport (without expenditures) Model railway Fair: son+partner  completely  not at all

(k) Flat / house (without expenditures)  completely  not at all

(l) How are your feelings today about your relationship?  completely  not at all

3 How are your feelings today about your relationship?

happy  unhappy  strong  weak  unfree  free

4 Who contributed more to your relationship today (e.g. money, information, things, love, services, work received acceptance etc.)?

1 Partner  0  0  0  0  0  0  0

5 Did you make a decision today, without talking about it with your partner?  yes  no

6 Purchase of a model railway (if expenditures were concerned, how much money did you spend? 52300 ATS)  completely  not at all

Page 1: Husband's report

Page 1: Husband's report

Date: 27.10.1996 Time: 22:00 pm Place: At home

1 Did you talk to your partner today?  no  yes

How long have you been together? 240 minutes

How long did you talk to each other? 60 minutes

2 Did you talk about the following topics?

Did you agree about the topic? (yes, no)

(a) Expenditures for Railway model: son and me  completely  not at all

(b) Savings (term)  completely  not at all

(c) Money matters  completely  not at all

(d) Work (job)  completely  not at all

(e) Homework Disorder  completely  not at all

(f) Myself/partner She is narrow-minded  completely  not at all

(g) Relationship "icey"  completely  not at all

If you did not talk to your partner today or if you had no disagreements, the questions end here

(h) Children Daughter complains  completely  not at all

(i) Friends / Relatives  completely  not at all

(j) Leisure time / hobby / journey / vacation / sport (without expenditures) Model railway Fair: son+partner  completely  not at all

(k) Flat / house (without expenditures)  completely  not at all

(l) How are your feelings today about your relationship?  completely  not at all

3 How are your feelings today about your relationship?

happy  unhappy  strong  weak  unfree  free

4 Who contributed more to your relationship today (e.g. money, information, things, love, services, work received acceptance etc.)?

1 Partner  0  0  0  0  0  0  0

5 Did you make a decision today, without talking about it with your partner?  yes  no

6 Purchase of a model railway (if expenditures were concerned, how much money did you spend? 52300 ATS)  completely  not at all

Figure 5.1 Day's diary sheet - husband and wife

continued overleaf

Figure 5.1 Continued

Topic: Expenditures for a model railway

Please indicate the topic on which you disagreed:

Code: BOKAL2H Date: 27.10.1996

Where were you during the talk?	1 = at home 2 = semi-private rooms (e.g. workshop) 3 = public rooms (e.g. bank, shop, restaurant, street)	1	Partner	1
Who was present (besides the partner)?	4 = children 5 = parents / parents-in-law 6 = friends / relatives 7 = acquaintances / relatives 8 = experts (asked for own consent) 9 = other persons	4		
What were you doing during the talk?	10 = paid work (job) 11 = homework 12 = work involving the children 13 = obligations (e.g. earning self-maintenance) 14 = recreation	13	13	10
How long did the talk last?	minutes			10
How often have you already talked about the topic?	never often			often
Who started the talk?	1 = partner 2 = partner	1	1	partner
Who is well informed about the topic?	1 = no knowledge 2 = much knowledge	1	partner	no knowledge
How important is the topic to you / to me?	1 = unimportant 2 = important	1	partner	unimportant
If money is at stake how much is it?	2300 ATS	5		
How was the emotional climate during the talk?	1 = pleasant 2 = unpleasant	1	partner	unpleasant
How objectively did you talk with your partner?	1 = objectively 2 = objectively	1	partner	objectively

How emotionally did you talk with your partner?	1 = without emotions 2 = emotional	1	partner	without emotions
What percentage of influence did you have / your partner have?	1 = 100% 2 = 40%	1	partner	40%
Have you reached a decision?	1 = yes 2 = no	1	partner	no
How fair was the decision procedure?	1 = fair 2 = unfair	1	partner	unfair
If you did reach a decision, how much will you / your partner profit from the decision (100%)?	1 = 100% 2 = 0%	1	partner	0%
How much did you / your partner profit from the last decision?	1 = 100% 2 = 50%	1	partner	50%
What tactics did you and your partner use to try to influence each other (please indicate the sequence; List 1)?	1 = 1 2 = 18 3 = 11 4 = 9 5 = 7 6 = 2 7 = 10 8 = 12 9 = 8	1	partner	18
What type of disagreement did you have?	1 = Value topic 2 = Probability topic 3 = Distributional topic	1	partner	Value topic
Are you happy with the outcome of the talk?	1 = very much 2 = not at all	1	partner	not at all
How well can you remember the talk?	1 = very much 2 = not at all	1	partner	not at all

Page 2: Husband's report

Topic: Expenditures ATS 2300 for a model railway

he has already bought it himself

Please indicate the topic on which you disagreed:

Code: BOKAL2H Date: 27.10.1996

Where were you during the talk?	1 = at home 2 = semi-private rooms (e.g. workshop) 3 = public rooms (e.g. bank, shop, restaurant, street)	1	Partner	1
Who was present (besides the partner)?	4 = children 5 = parents / parents-in-law 6 = friends / relatives 7 = acquaintances / relatives 8 = experts (asked for own consent) 9 = other persons	4		
What were you doing during the talk?	10 = paid work (job) 11 = homework 12 = work involving the children 13 = obligations (e.g. earning self-maintenance) 14 = recreation	13	13	10
How long did the talk last?	minutes			10
How often have you already talked about the topic?	never often			often
Who started the talk?	1 = partner 2 = partner	1	1	partner
Who is well informed about the topic?	1 = no knowledge 2 = much knowledge	1	partner	no knowledge
How important is the topic to you / to me?	1 = unimportant 2 = important	1	partner	unimportant
If money is at stake how much is it?	2300 ATS	5		
How was the emotional climate during the talk?	1 = pleasant 2 = unpleasant	1	partner	pleasant
How objectively did you talk with your partner?	1 = objectively 2 = objectively	1	partner	objectively

How emotionally did you talk with your partner?	1 = without emotions 2 = emotional	1	partner	without emotions
What percentage of influence did you have / your partner have?	1 = 100% 2 = 0%	1	partner	0%
Have you reached a decision?	1 = yes 2 = no	1	partner	no
How fair was the decision procedure?	1 = fair 2 = unfair	1	partner	unfair
If you did reach a decision, how much will you / your partner profit from the decision (100%)?	1 = 100% 2 = 0%	1	partner	0%
How much did you / your partner profit from the last decision?	1 = 100% 2 = 40%	1	partner	40%
What tactics did you and your partner use to try to influence each other (please indicate the sequence; List 1)?	1 = 1 2 = 6 3 = 7 4 = 8 5 = 10 6 = 12 7 = 16	1	partner	10
What type of disagreement did you have?	1 = Value topic 2 = Probability topic 3 = Distributional topic	1	partner	Value topic
Are you happy with the outcome of the talk?	1 = very much 2 = not at all	1	partner	not at all
How well can you remember the talk?	1 = very much 2 = not at all	1	partner	not at all

Page 2: Wife's report

(tactic 7) and finally she left the scene (tactic 8). Peter, on the other hand, described Mary as using negative emotions (tactic 2), and threatening to withdraw resources (tactic 6). He felt that she then started lying (tactic 10) and built direct coalitions (tactic 12). Finally, she had left the scene (tactic 8). Peter indicated that he had argued rationally (tactic 18), reminded his wife of the utility of the purchase for their son (tactic 11) and openly revealed his point of view (tactic 9), but, finally, he had also just insisted (tactic 7). Mary described Peter's behaviour as follows: he was not honest (tactic 10), tried to form coalitions with other persons (tactic 12), and reminded her of past favours which he wanted to be paid back (tactic 16). For a complete list of tactics, see Table 5.1, taken from Kirchler (1993).

Now, let us have a look at how the story started. It started in August, as can be read in the diary entries:

*Thursday, 15 August 1996:* a public holiday – Peter and Mary spent ten hours together this day. For two hours they had been talking about a birthday party and a visit from friends and acquaintances. They had also been talking about the son's birthday present. But they did not totally agree on the matter. The present was to consist of some parts of a model railway costing about 1,500 ATS (euro 110). They had talked about it for about five minutes. The emotional climate was not the best. Peter thought that Mary had been talking rather subjectively and reported that she had a little more influence on the decision than he had. She thought that she had 80% of the influence while he had 20%. Both reported that they profited equally from the decision to buy the model railway for their son. Also, both felt that the decision process as well as the decision outcome were fair. But Peter was rather unhappy with the outcome of the discussion, whereas Mary was quite happy.

*Sunday, 1 September 1996:* Peter and Mary were together for ten hours that Sunday and were talking for three hours, mainly about joint housework and their relationship, which they both thought was very satisfying. Again, the model railway came up and Peter reported an autonomous purchase to his wife: He had bought one piece of the model railway which cost 150 ATS (euro 11). During the conversation, they were eating together with their children. Both discussed the matter relatively objectively, Peter was a little bit more emotional than Mary. Both spouses thought that he had 70% of the influence while she had 30%. She reported that he had 100% of the profit, Peter thought that his wife had 10%, while he had 90%. Mary was not that happy with the outcome of the talk, Peter was.

*Monday, 2 September 1996:* Mary and Peter spent just half an hour

together on that day. The few minutes they had for conversation they spent talking about work stress and not having enough time for each other. Also, the beginning of school for the children was mentioned. The model railway was again a topic in the short conversation. Mary reported that they did not agree on the matter. She reported disagreement and provided information about the talk in her diary. She described the topic as not being as important to her as to her husband, but he had spent more money (1,400 ATS, euro 100) for the present than they had agreed upon. The climate of that conversation was unpleasant; Mary had discussed very subjectively compared to Peter. She thought that she had only 20% of the influence and just 40% of the profit, while he had 80% of influence and 60% of the profit. Already, in the last decision, Mary had had just 20% of the profit, which meant that she had lost influence during the discussions and had a decreasing profit. She thought that the decision process and the decision outcome were very unfair. She was very unhappy about the outcome of the discussion. Peter did not report on the disagreement in his diary at all on that day.

The final report on the conflict is given on 27 October 1996 and led to the outcome described at the beginning of the case report.

### Questions for the case study

- 1 How can spouses' relative influence in consumer decisions be assessed?
- 2 Do you think that the decision dynamics vary across relationships and if so, which relationship characteristics need to be considered?
- 3 What are the likely methodological shortcomings if spouses are just asked about who is the decision maker if certain topics are at stake?
- 4 What tactics do spouses use to convince the other to yield in decisions on expenditures?
- 5 Why should household decision making be studied?

### Note

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