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Impact of Spouses' Past Influence Patterns on Economic Decision Making

A Couple's Diary Technique Applied in Vietnamese Households

ELFRIEDE PENZ AND ERICH KIRCHLER

Motivation

In emerging markets, consumers such as the Vietnamese middle class in urban areas are becoming more affluent. Today, consumer spending is an important part of Vietnam's economy (Cohen, 2004; Euromonitor International, 2010). These developments transform families' and individuals' consumption habits. After they become wealthier, consumers tend to spend money on expensive products, such as luxury goods, cars, furniture, and high-end technology (Khanh and Hau, 2007).

Little is known about purchase decision making in emerging markets at the level of private households. We study couples' economic decision-making processes in an emerging market, Vietnam, using a diary technique over a period of three months. This is novel, as husband and wife independently reported their perceptions and behaviors during decision-making processes by filling in the structured diary every day. This allows for dyadic analyses and keeping track of the decision and mutual influence history. In addition, the role in decision making of each spouse can be analyzed.

Conceptualization

When it comes to purchase decisions in Asian culture, close relationships matter. The Vietnamese invest in harmonious and stable relationships and prefer products to be used as social symbols. Long-term family interests are more important than individual interests (Le and Jolibert, 2001). In Vietnam and other transitional countries with a Confucian tradition, the family was long considered an autonomous unit (Fowler, Gao, and Carlson, 2010; Nguyen, Kirk, and Johnson, 2009). From a consumer research perspective, this is relevant to studies on economic decision making.

Households are sites of cooperation, where conflicting interests are often subject to negotiation (Burgoyne and Kirchler, 2008). While economic and consumption habits are changing rapidly, middle-class families appear to be preserving their traditional influence patterns in purchase decisions (Penz and Kirchler, 2012).

In close relationships, the influence on decisions is studied by analyzing interaction patterns and settlement of disagreements in everyday matters and determining the influence of partners on conflicts and decision making. However, the decision dynamics—that is, looking at sequences of decision making and decisions that are interconnected—have largely been neglected in past research. We aim to find out in what topic areas conflicts arise, how they are perceived emotionally, how they affect relationship quality, and what tactics couples use to settle conflicts. With regard to the dynamics of decisions, we investigate whether past decisions influence subsequent decisions—that is, whether balance in influence between partners is established.

Methodology

A diary study based on the Vienna Diary Study was developed consisting of two diary question sheets (Kirchler et al., 2001). The first set of questions related to whether couples talked to each other, what issues they talked about, whether there was (dis)agreement, and how they felt. The overall feeling about the partnership and who contributed more to the partnership were included as well.

The second set of questions related to a specific conflict that was reported. For the conflict, couples independently reported descriptive information (where they were, who was with them, how long the conversation took, etc.) as well as perceptual information about who had more knowledge and influence on the topic, how important the topic was, whether a decision was derived, and so on. In addition, couples had to choose from a list of tactics (Kirchler et al., 2001) that they used in the conflict. In addition to self-reports, the perception of the partner's behavior was indicated as well, allowing for studying the subjective perception of the couple. Participants in the study were asked to fill in the diary every day for three months. A few minutes per day was required to complete the diary sheets.

A total of 52 middle-class couples participated. The couples were approached by a local researcher and received a detailed explanation of the procedure. They were paid US\$80 per month for participating. The average participating couple lived with one or two children. Their level of education was above the national average. Women were, on average, 44 years old and men were 48 years old. Both partners were working. On average, couples spent about six hours together, with one hour per day talking to each other.

Major Findings

Couples discussed primarily the topics of children, consumption, spending, and work. They agreed on most topics and reported that feelings during the conversation were average to good. Overall, men felt better, more powerful, and much freer than women in the partnership. Men also indicated that their wives invested more in the partnership than they did. With respect to conflict issues, participants reported overall 3.682 conflicts, which took place mainly at home and lasted for about half an hour on average. Often discussed conflicts related to the household (e.g., appliances: 25.8 percent), children (e.g., education: 22.2 percent), food (e.g., groceries: 16.9 percent), personal expenditures (e.g., clothing: 15.9 percent), luxury goods (e.g., travel: 14.7 percent), and family/friends (e.g., gifts: 4.3 percent).

The relevance of past decision dynamics on actual spouses' influence patterns was tested by hierarchical regression analyses. Various "influence bookkeeping" models were analyzed. First, Vietnamese couples decide mainly based on existing knowledge about a conflict topic: the partner with more knowledge is more influential in the decision. Second, when it comes to patterns of influence, results show that past decisions seem to influence the subsequent decision positively. This means that the person who decided in the past decides in the current situation as well, and no balancing of influence across decisions within couples is achieved. This was particularly true for men, who also had more influence even if their benefit from the decision outcome was low. These results indicate—unlike what was found in a European study (Kirchler et al., 2001)—that partners in Vietnam practice influence segmentation—that is, clear role segmentation between husband and wife. Although decision making seems to be a rather unbalanced activity regarding mutual influence over a period of three months, more variability and balance emerged from looking at smaller time periods.

Results need to be interpreted along the Vietnamese cultural context, which is a masculine-dominated culture in which maintaining or losing face is an important concern. Decision making in close relationships is characterized by clear role differentiation, confirming research on sex-role stereotypes in Vietnam (Penz and Kirchler, 2012).

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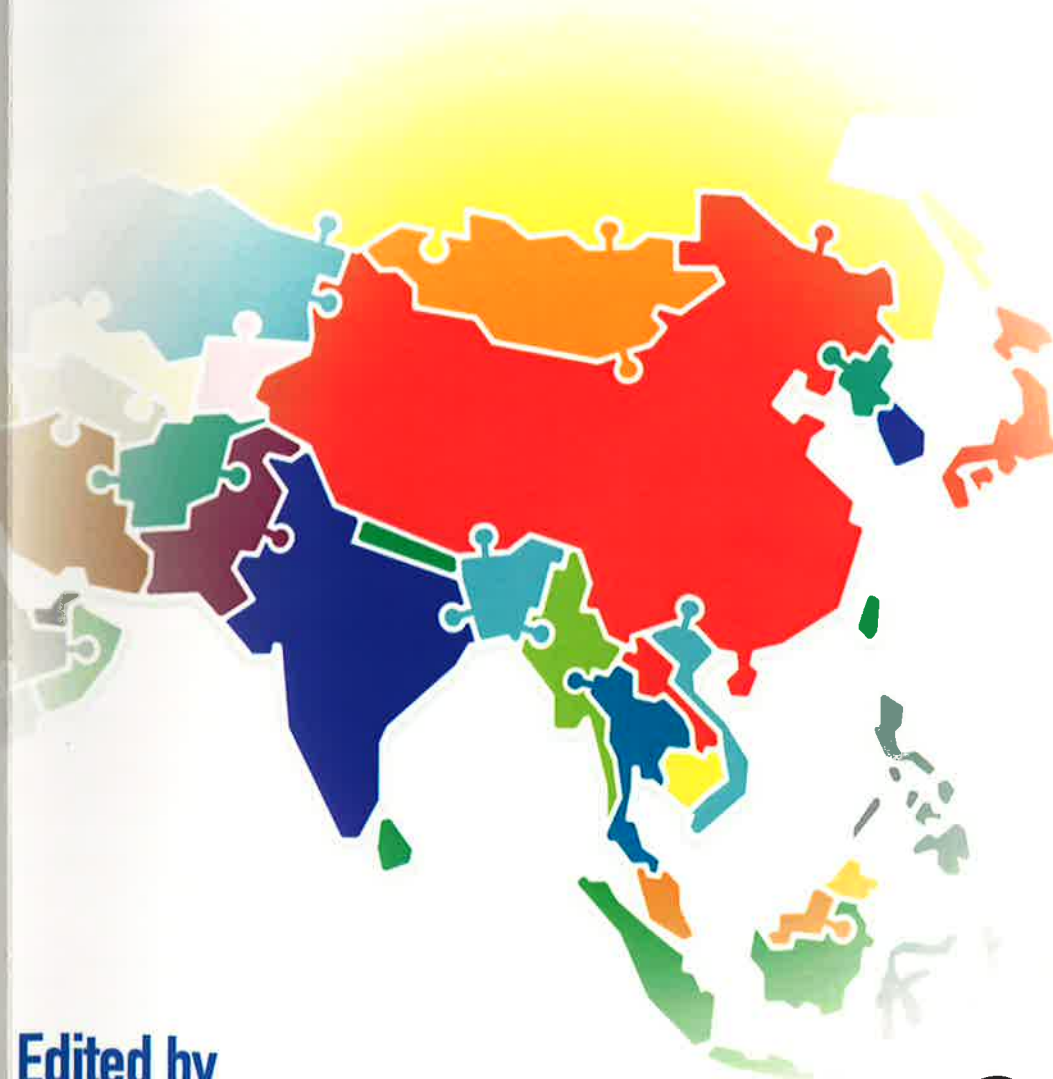


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