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## Abstract

Consumerism not only introduces new electronic money and financial exclusion in contemporary society, but it also analyses social and the social meaning of money in consumerist society. Recent sociological theory on money and budgeting ([Pahl, 1999, 2002](#); [Singh, 1997, 1999](#); [Zelizer, 1997, 2005](#)) and recent critiques of consumption studies (Edgell, Hetherington and Warde 1996; Gronow and Warde, 2001; [Lodziak, 2002](#)), it argues that experiences of social and financial exclusion in consumerist society must be related to the amount of money available within the household, the social position that the household occupies, and the social form that this money takes. [Pahl \(1999\)](#) shows that the development of electronic money seems to alter and further constrain access to consumption for the 'credit poor' and 'information poor'. To this 'technological filter', a 'social filter' may be added, as the results suggest that consumption patterns and the social meaning of money in low-income families are largely incompatible with prevailing neo-liberalist ideas of money and consumption in contemporary society.

## Introduction

Much is written about the images of consumer culture produced by advertising, shopping malls, theme parks and the mass media. Very little is written about consumer culture as an economic phenomenon.

([Lodziak, 2002](#): vii)

The aim of this article is to analyze economic and social inequality by looking at consumption patterns and access to money in contemporary Scandinavian society. Theoretically, the article brings together two bodies of literature that have hitherto been separate: consumption studies and studies on financial exclusion. Whereas consumption studies, broadly speaking, have ignored access to money and the existence of socially differentiated understandings of money, social policy studies have

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focused on economic and financial exclusion without attempting to theorize about the specific form of social exclusion that can be associated with consumerism (cf. Kempson, Bryson and Rowlington, 1994; [Kempson, 1996](#)). Recently, a few studies theorized the changing forms of social marginalization that seemed to take place following the development of neo-liberalist discourse, and the introduction of new forms of money and finance prevailing in consumerist society ([Pahl, 1999, 2002](#); [Power, 2005](#); [Singh, 1997](#)). Drawing on their work, as well as on recent sociological theories on money and the different social meanings of Western money ([Zelizer, 1997, 2005](#)), this article argues that experiences of economic vulnerability must be analyzed by studying both the *amount* of money available and the *qualitative earmarking, conceptualization of money and ways of budgeting* that take place within the household. Limited financial resources seem to presuppose certain ways of budgeting, controlling and conceptualizing money, ways which are incompatible with dominant forms of finance and prevailing ideas of money in consumerist society. In addition, the financial struggle for low-income consumers (especially women) appears to take place within the sphere of morality as a struggle to become 'respectable' instead of 'flawed' consumers ([Skeggs, 1997](#); [Bauman, 1998](#); [Hohnen, 2003](#) and 2006).

## Review of literature

### Critical perspectives on consumption research

In the 1980s consumption studies started to develop as a new research field in sociology and social anthropology. With a few exceptions, this new field of consumption studies epitomized a theoretical shift in attention towards the study of the symbolic attributes of late capitalism and away from the prevailing (neo-marxist) preoccupation with production and utility value (cf. [Campbell, 1986](#); [Miller, 1987](#); [McCracken, 1990](#); [Bourdieu, 1984](#); [Featherstone, 1991](#)). Consumption researchers focused on taste, fashion and lifestyle, and the theoretical perspective was dominated by cultural studies, symbolism and semiotics (cf. [Baudrillard, 1998](#); [Featherstone, 1991](#)). The theoretical idea was that processes of increased affluence and mass consumption would undermine traditional distinctions between social groups, affording individuals greater scope to narrate their senses of identity through lifestyle. However, a number of researchers have recently voiced a critique of what they find to be a 'culturalist bias' originating from this early influence of cultural studies and postmodernism (cf. Edgell, Hetherington and Warde, 1996; Gronow and Warde, 2001; [Gabriel and Lang, 1995](#); [Carrier and Heyman, 1997](#); [Löfgren, 1996](#); [Hohnen, 2006](#); [Lodziak, 2002](#)). Although most of these researchers acknowledge Bourdieu's now classic work 'Distinction' ([Bourdieu, 1984](#)) as an exception (viewing consumption as socially structured and constrained), they present a number of reservations concerning what they consider a 'theoretical bias' in most prevailing consumption theory: an over-emphasis on symbolic and spectacular consumption, and a lack of concern with social inequality and the material basis for people's consumption. However, in spite of a common concern with this 'culturalist bias', critiques have taken different directions.

Löfgren (1996) and Gronow and Warde (2001) are mainly concerned with the focus on 'the spectacular' and extraordinary dimensions of consumption within the existing literature:

In the course of research on consumers, teenagers, home-builders and TV audiences one sometimes feels as if one is slithering around in a semiotic jungle of whispers and shouts, of opinions, implications, messages ... What we find in so much of the cultural research of the 1980s and 1990s is a virtual unawareness and gradual narrowing down of the study of consumption

([Löfgren, 1996](#): 120).

Löfgren thus finds a striking focus on young people and 'playing' with identities through consumption, while the more bleak and unheroic use of, for example, bus tickets, electricity and low-fat milk is ignored, as are studies of poverty and downward social mobility. Löfgren especially finds the omission unfortunate, seeing that consumption patterns and especially normative concepts of what is regarded as 'rational consumption' form an important ideological battlefield where the 'right' and most rational consumption patterns are emphasized and the 'wrong' consumption patterns are exposed. The dearth of studies of poverty and consumption, everyday consumption and the lack of consideration given to the moral discourses of consumption results in the moral and political meanings of consumption remaining implicit.

Taking a similar starting point in criticising the over-emphasis on spectacular consumption, Gronow and Warde (2001) identify a series of gaps concerning 'ordinary' consumption. They subsequently suggest a new research agenda:

We thus propose consolidation of the sociology of consumption in the awareness that there has been excessive concentration on some topics to the exclusion of others. Our contention is that (these) ordinary practices comprise a significant proportion of the total range of activity that might be called consumption, and that they are not ones readily explained by the dominant theoretical approaches of the recent past. It therefore requires theoretical renewal and development, and the deployment of some different conceptual tools, as well as empirical study of relevant behaviours, to be able properly to appreciate the importance of ordinary consumption.

(Gronow and Warde, 2001: 5)

Where Löfgren positions the main theoretical challenges in the field of morality and social politics, Gronow and Warde are more inclined to develop the theoretical framework in the direction of conceptualizing ordinary or routine practices of consumption. Both Gronow and Warde and Löfgren basically identify the problem as one of 'scope', and view the range of topics studied as being both too

narrow and biased. Subsequently, they suggest expanding the empirical focus, thereby requiring theoretical adjustment and development.

Other critical researchers have directed their critique towards what they consider problematic basic assumptions within prevalent 'consumption studies' ([Bauman, 1998, 1999](#); [Chin, 2001](#); [Lodziak, 2002](#); [Carrier and Heyman, 1997](#)). [Lodziak \(2002\)](#) building partially on [Bauman \(1999\)](#), in his book *The Myth of Consumerism*, criticizes prevailing consumption theory for having an ideological basis, and reproducing the economic market rhetoric, particularly the notion of free choice and consumption as an entirely identity-related and social marker. He also finds that the economic dimension of consumption is usually not allocated any explanatory role within the dominant framework, that no importance is attached to commercial interests, and that general prosperity is taken for granted. He therefore agrees with [Chin \(2001\)](#), that '... consumption theory is often based on the idea that consumers are first and foremost middle-class' ([Chin, 2001](#): 11). Lodziak states:

During the past ten years or so within the academic fields of the sociology of culture and cultural studies, *a theoretical consensus* has emerged with respect to the study of consumption. This consensus portrays the realm of consumption as an arena of choice and individual freedom, it focuses on the meaningful nature of consumption – its symbolic value rather than its material use value, and it emphasises the significance of consumption formation, maintenance and expression of self-identity and lifestyle ([Lodziak, 2002](#): 1) (My underlining)

A similar critique of the theoretical assumptions consumption studies has come from social anthropologists Carrier and Heyman. Their overall concern is that anthropological studies of consumption in particular have failed to locate consumption in a broader framework of political economy – and that this failure has resulted in a lack of theoretical concern with issues that were previously a part of economic anthropology, such as material conditions and inequalities of social life ([Carrier and Heyman, 1997](#): 355). Along with Lodziak, Carrier and Heyman are also reluctant to picture this framework in terms of traditional concepts of social class, and they criticize the widespread theoretical assumption (partly inspired by Bourdieu) that a general hierarchy of 'taste' and social status are maintained via consumption. Following Weber, Carrier and Heyman contend that although status groups may be ranked in a specific way in any given society, they are not reducible to the dimensions that underlie such ranking ([Carrier and Heyman, 1997](#): 369).

In this article I take the perspective that we must understand consumption as partly constrained and shaped by social position and class. However, I agree with [Lodziak \(2002\)](#) and [Carrier and Heyman \(1997\)](#) that access to resources and ways in which people 'make sense' of their financial situation is not entirely consistent with a traditional conceptualization of class differences. An analysis of the meanings of money and access to finance in low-income households instead suggests a theoretical perspective focusing on the development of new forms of distinction, originating in class differences, but where

new boundaries between those who participate in the 'consumerist universe' and those who do not are being created (cf. [Bauman, 1998](#); [Beck, 1992](#); [Giddens, 1991](#)).

## Studies on financial exclusion

Several studies on low-income budgeting and financial exclusion have been carried out both in Scandinavia (c.f. [Borgeraas, 2003](#); [Bonke et al., 2005](#); [Brusdal, 1988](#); [Hjort, 2004](#); [Hjort and Salonen, 2000](#); [Hallerød, 1998](#)), and elsewhere, particularly in the UK ([Kempson, 1996](#); Kempson, Whyley, Caskey and Collard, 2000; [Kempson and Collard, 2005](#); [Singh et al., 2005](#)). This research has highlighted the dilemmas that parents in low-income households face in making ends meet in a society dominated by expectations of affluence. An important area of this research has been studies about the intra-household distribution of money and the relationship between forms of finance within the household and gender inequalities in both middle-class and low-income families ([Pahl, 1989, 2000, 2002](#); Goode, Callender and Lister, 1998; [Nyman, 2002](#); [Vogler, 2005](#)). Building on [Pahl \(1989\)](#), this article argues that financial arrangements within the household epitomize other aspects of gender roles, and that financial arrangements within the household, therefore, may serve as a methodological starting point for researching other issues of marriage and gender.

Recently, the study of financial arrangements has also included new forms of money, saving, credit and finance, focusing on the social consequences of the overall shift towards electronic money ([Pahl, 1999](#); [Rowlingson, 1994](#); [Rowlingson and Kempson, 1994](#); [Singh, 1997](#) and 1999). The overall conclusion following from this research is that low-income households participate only to a very limited extent in the electronic economy, whether in the form of credit cards, network banking or other electronic types of money and credit. In addition, the gender bias of intra-household consumption seems to be reproduced and possibly reinforced in the electronic economy, as women, to a much smaller extent than men, tend to be familiar with and use various forms of credit and debit cards and internet banking. In sum, studies on financial exclusion suggest that access to credit and electronic money is related to social factors such as gender, income and education. However, only a few of these studies have attempted to theorize the altered form that social exclusion may take following the introduction of new forms of money. An exception is [Pahl \(1999 and 2002\)](#), who argues that new forms of money constrain and enhance the access that individuals have to the money that enters their household:

Thus managing and spending money is no longer simply a matter of making the cash go round, but an electronic activity which is shaped by complex social and economic processes. The effect is to create a global financial system which privileges some individuals and households and from which others are partly or completely excluded ([Pahl, 1999](#): 2).

This approach points towards a framework where money and financing are not solely related to income level and the amount of money available for each person in the household, but where the

interplay between economic and symbolical forms of value becomes central in analyzing the construction of new forms of social differentiation processes in consumerist society.

## Theorizing money

In her historical analysis of forms of money in the US, *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Paychecks, Poor Relief, and other Currencies*, Viviana [Zelizer \(1997\)](#)<sup>1</sup> argues that although money shapes cultural and social values, the reverse is also true, as cultural and social values heavily influence the conceptualization, earmarking and spending of not only 'private' but also what she terms 'market money':

... money is neither culturally neutral nor socially anonymous. It may well 'corrupt' values and convert social ties into numbers, but values and social relations reciprocally transmute money by investing it with meaning and social patterns (ibid.: 18).

Zelizer constructs an analytical framework in which money is theorized so as to account the cultural and social structures that influence, limit and control 'the flowing stream of money', and she is thus involved in linking the economic, social and cultural significance of money (ibid.: 18). As a part of this theorizing she sets up the concepts of 'social currencies' and the 'earmarking' of money. In her view, money is not hampered by social limitations but rather represents more socially composed 'currencies' linked to social circumstances and invested with specific values and norms, especially where the social interaction is marked by specific interests. These may take the form of establishing or dissolving specific social relations (eg the payment of child support and alimony), controlling others (eg by bribery), or establishing or maintaining particular forms of social inequality in the form of patron/client relations (eg by way of social payments or charity). A conflict often arises between the exchanging parties about both the content and control of the earmarking. Zelizer actually enumerates a number of different techniques for the earmarking of money:

... such as restricting the uses of money, regulating modes of allocation, inventing rituals for its presentation, modifying its physical appearance, designating separate locations for particular monies, attaching special meanings to particular amounts, appointing proper users to handle specified monies, and earmarking appropriate sources of money for specific uses (Zelizer 29).

However, although Zelizer states (as her first quote clearly indicates) that market money in itself influences social relations and cultural values, her main concern is to analyze the reverse, thereby developing a sociological framework for understanding the influence of such relations on market

money. She therefore has little to say about the impact of electronic money on the meaning that people attribute to their money or the social consequences that the development of such forms may have, although she states that 'electronic money' tends to be rather more difficult to earmark and therefore more like the neoclassical conceptualization of money, ie socially and culturally neutral. In the following empirical analysis I combine Zelizer's analytical framework for ways of earmarking money with Pahl's suggestion that the form that money has or is given also epitomizes social differentiation and that the amount of money that people have at their disposal cannot be separated from either their consumption patterns or the 'earmarking' of money.

## Methods and material

The following analysis is based on 50 semi-structured interviews with Swedish and Danish families with children living in two predominantly low-income neighbourhoods close to the cities of Copenhagen and Malmo. The families interviewed were strategically selected according to income level, residence and source of income. I interviewed 35 parents in low-income families and, to create a space of comparison with dominant consumption patterns, I also interviewed 15 parents from middle-class families, with dual incomes. All had children living at home. Most families had two or three children, a few had only one, and a few had five or six.

About half of the low-income households had one wage income, mostly from low- or unskilled work in healthcare, cleaning or the social services, whereas the other half received income support, unemployment benefits, or sickness benefits. On average the low-income families had £500 – £600 a month for food and personal expenses for a family of four.<sup>2</sup> Some families, especially those with debts, had considerably less. Finally, about half of the low-income households consisted of single parents (all but two of whom were women).

As intra-household spending was not the main aim of the present project, consequently only one interview took place in each household. In each case I asked to speak to the parent responsible for the daily shopping. In the low-income families, most often the women who would volunteer to be interviewed, whereas more variety existed in the middle-class families, where almost half the respondents were men. This difference seems to reflect a more general pattern emphasized in existing research, where women usually take responsibility for managing finances when resources are scarce, while men more often have that role in middle-class couples (cf. [Kempson, 1996](#)). All the middle-class parents had a stable income, and many had secure positions in the labour market, where they occupied a range of skilled jobs or leading positions within both the private and the public sectors. The amount of money at their disposal for food and personal expenses was between £1.000 and £1.800 a month. I shall occasionally refer to the experiences of these middle-class families, even though their answers are not the focus of this analysis, however, their answers nevertheless constitute a contrast to low-income consumption.

Most low-income families were contacted via a 'gatekeeper'. In Sweden the gatekeeper was a local preschool teacher. In Denmark the gatekeeper was a social worker employed by the local housing authority. They would make the initial contact, and set up appointments for interviews, which took place at either the family home or an office, the local school, or the local housing office. People from low-income households were uncomfortable and sometimes nervous when talking about consumption. Time and again a person would not turn up for the appointment, in spite of having initially agreed to be interviewed, while at other times the atmosphere during an interview would be tense, with the interviewee replying to questions with obvious unease. In many cases the interview situation reflected their position as 'constrained' consumers in the sense that parents experienced each purchase as a burden rather than a pleasure, and therefore did not find it very attractive to talk about the anxieties and feelings of guilt related to their everyday consumption. The interviews with the middle-class parents formed a striking contrast. These interviews often included joking and laughing, giving examples of needless consumption and superfluous purchases by either the husband or the wife. These interviews reflected their role as privileged consumers in the sense that they felt secure in their role as consumers vis à vis the market, and had sufficient means to regard each purchase with confidence.

## Money in low-income households in Denmark and Sweden

### The necessity of earmarking

One of the most persistent differences between the interview answers on consumption patterns among the low-income families and the middle-class families is the degree of planned versus impulsive patterns of spending. Consumption amongst economically vulnerable families with children is characterized by being predetermined. Lists are written, budgets are drawn up, and newspapers advertising special offers available at low-priced shops and discount stores are carefully studied. The crucial motivation behind the consumption is partly to make the money last until the next income payment, and partly to fulfil the family's material demands, especially in the form of clothes and meals for the entire month. Money in these families is therefore divided according to needs consumption under headings such as rent and regular outlays, a pair of sandals, 30 evening meals, milk, bread and train tickets. Most of the parents in these families know precisely how much money they have at their disposal and what they must spend it on. In a continuation of Zelizer's earlier observations, broadly speaking all the money in these families is earmarked for specific purposes before it has even been received.

The way we prioritize is so that there's food and toilet paper and shampoo and all that sort of thing. We stock up well on things like this on the first of the month if we are short, *so that we*



*have enough for the whole month.* And then we try to fill up the freezer and so on, so that we have food for the whole month ...

(Danish single mother, social care worker, one daughter)

I do not actually put the money in an envelope, but I calculate how much I can spend in a week.

(Swedish single mother, social care worker, one boy)

In contrast, the middle-class families seemed to have an altogether different approach to spending, as a large part of their everyday consumption was unplanned. Although middle-class households would also make lists when buying food, their functions would be mainly to avoid forgetting anything, and planning did not characterise their spending: For example, a Swedish man from the middle-class group said:

We never plan to go and buy clothes. It is always on impulse I should say. My wife sees something that she likes – a dress for example and then she buys it ...

(Swedish father, chauffeur on parental leave, three children)

## Strategies of control

The low-income families handled their limited economic resources carefully and as a matter of principle designed various strategies to control consumption. At the same time, these strategies indicate some specific patterns concerning the relationship between the kind of money and the way it is quantitatively spent.

One such type of strategy involves the actual buying of goods, through making an attempt to control expenditures by setting aside a specific sum of money or by employing specific buying tactics, eg, by hurrying through the shop or reducing the number of visits to shops.

Well, sometimes I make lists, but if I only need four things, then I only take 100 kroner with me, and then I just dash in and get what I need, because otherwise I would spend far too much money.

(Danish single mother (widowed), on social support, five children)

I tend to reflect: 'Do I need to buy this or not ... Sometimes I leave the shop and I tell the cashier that I have to go out and think about it ... "Do that" she may say, and then I take a walk and decide if I shall take it'... . (Swedish single mother, social care worker, two small children)

These 'restrictive' strategies, which also involve the use of prepaid phone cards instead of a subscription to a mobile telephone, represent one kind of controlling money in the form of an actual limitation of 'the amount to be spent for a specific purpose'.

## Electronic money or cash?

The tendency to limit and divide money was also present in a more significant form, as none of the poor families had a credit or a debit card. When asked about cards, they said that while they could get one (although some families receiving cash benefits and families with large debts are unable to obtain any form of card), they did not want to use electronic money.

I don't want credit ... I have done it earlier that's why ... when I pay now, I pay cash.

(Swedish single mother, social care worker, two small children)

I would rather have cash so that I can feel how much money I've got, and so that I know that now I've spent it, and that's that. I don't know whether a debit card would be too tempting for me - I just don't dare - this thing of being able to draw an extra 100 kroner, it might be too tempting, because all of a sudden it gets out of hand.

(Danish single mother, social care worker, one girl)

In line with existing research on access to electronic money and new forms of finance ([Rowlingson and Kempson, 1994](#); Pahl, 1999 and Singh, 1997), these families make a clear distinction between debit card money and cash. Cash is something one can hold in one's hands and quite simply know it's there, how much there is and when one has spent it. One can earmark it for specific purposes and in this way limit and restrict how much one spends. It is different with electronic money. The attitude towards electronic money is not just a question of being afraid of spending too much, but more of being afraid of completely losing control by opening up a flow of non-earmarked and therefore uncontrollable money. As [Zelizer \(1997\)](#) concludes, electronic money, to a greater extent than cash, seems to resemble the economists' ideal conception of neutral, divisible and exclusively quantitative money that is difficult to earmark qualitatively. That people with very little money are afraid of electronic money is probably bound up with the difficulty of earmarking qualitatively different and qualitatively significant amounts aimed at specific needs and set aside for specific expenses. In this way controlling money becomes more difficult, with the result that one may lose track of things and the possibility of establishing priorities.

## The time of money

### Financial timescales

In addition to the categorization of money in relation to source of income and consumption needs, evaluation of the worth of money also depends on *when* in the month the assessment occurs. Money does not have the same value at the beginning of the month as it does at the end, and usually budgeting in low-income families is more restricted at the end. To the very limited extent that there is any 'free and unmarked money' in the household at all, such a situation would only occur at the time of the month when the pay-cheque has just arrived.

At the end of the month I might buy cheap and long lasting goods. At times when it is better financially I may buy ready made food like hamburgers, which they like ...

(Swedish mother, sickness benefit, two small boys)

You see, at the *beginning of the month we live more or less normally*, just like other people ... also with junk food or cola once in a while, and we may be a bit wasteful, but when we get towards the end of the month we may find we can't afford spelt flour, and so V ... has to eat rye bread. Sometimes, if he wants something or other, I say: 'All right, you can have it, but then you'll have to eat rye bread for the rest of the month'. 'OK, OK,' he says, and he doesn't mind. Towards the end of the month he isn't fussy, and he may say: 'Well, what are we having for dinner?' And then it's something terribly dull.

(Danish single mother, subsidized employment, two children)

The second of these quotations in particular shows not only how the family's budget adjusted to a 'monthly cycle of spending' but also how taste buds are influenced by the time of the month. Nearly all the low-income families emphasize this dimension in their consumption, their approach being that 'you don't buy shoes at the end of the month, do you?'

Such cyclic spending patterns were almost non-existent in the middle-class families, who they did not appear to monitor their spending in this way. They didn't have to calculate how much money remained in the account at the end of month. Not only did the middle-class couples have sufficient means to make the money last a month, but they also generally had access to credit, without having to take out a loan. This security made it easy for them to level out peaks in spending. When middle-class families calculated with a time schedule, it would be of a different kind, often much longer and aimed at larger purchases, eg buying a house.

## Money on time

But time is also at stake as a more general condition for the parents in low-income families, and having to calculate with small margins of both money and time added to their experience of vulnerability.

What I have for us a month is actually our rent allowance, because there is not much left of the other benefits. Then I have a budget account, and this money is withdrawn by the bank

from my child support allowance, which come at different times in the month. I get a supplement, and I know that J's money comes on the 28th, A's comes on the 4th, and then L's comes on the 1st.

(Danish single mother, income support, four children)

Child support is not regarded here in terms of amounts but with regard to the dates on which they arrived. The prompt regularity of such income is a major factor. It does not mean that people do not know how much money they are going to receive, but rather that in addition to the calculation of amount, timing is an important part of their idea of the value of the money. This factor becomes clear in the following quotation, where another woman tries to bring down her large debt by making agreements with her creditors about various fixed and, for her, very large monthly amounts. She cannot cope with paying off the last of her loans on the first of every month, together with the other installments, and so proposes to her creditors that they deduct repayments on this loan partly from her child support, which she receives from the father on the 20th of every month, and partly from the child allowance, which she receives every three months:

At the present moment I am fighting with one of these loans, so that every time I receive this money on the 20th it goes into this account, because otherwise I can't make ends meet, and then there is the money I receive every quarter, because if I also arrange for this to be paid [out of my monthly income] I just wouldn't be able to cope with it, because then there would be no money left at all. So then I thought, perhaps I could talk to them about making an arrangement whereby they receive an amount either on the 20th of each month or once every three months. And they accepted this.

(Danish single mother, social care worker, one daughter)

The point here is that the person could not work out the amount due to be paid on the basis of *how much* but on the basis of *which* money she should use to pay off the instalments on the loan in question. Even though calculating an average amount that could be paid monthly (and thus quantitatively speaking an amount corresponding to what is paid out of the money on the 20th of every month and once a quarter) was possible, she does not think this way, because for her it is not the same thing: It's too confusing if the repayment is to be made from the monthly income, so it must be taken from some other money.

An assessment of the person's ability to pay is thus a question not only of *how much* money but also largely *which* money can be used and *when* during the month it must be paid. This tendency to emphasize the timing of money also shows up in Zelizer's analysis of household commerce in American low-income households ([Zelizer, 2005](#)). Among American low-income families, the timing of tax income (refunds) evidently plays an important role in their budgeting ([Zelizer, 2005](#): 239).

## Bad timing and economic vulnerability

The time dimension is also at stake in a rather different way in those interviews, for families that receive a means-tested social security payment. The low-income persons found it hard to budget with these payments, because of discrepancies between the importance of timing for them and the lack of punctuality of the public institutions that are supposed to make the payment to supplement the income.

In the beginning they (Social Security) would help me paying the rent. At the time I didn't earn much. But even if I gave them the bill as soon as I got it ... they would often be late in paying it ... Sometimes two weeks could pass ... and I would receive a second bill ... and if I phoned them, they would tell me that they had already paid... . So now I am very happy that I can pay the rent myself ... It is nice to know that you are ensured to live here for another month ... (Swedish single mother, social care worker, two small girls).

They (Social Security) were always late in paying up so I would have to hurry down to the bank and withdraw my salary as soon as it was due in order to be certain to have money for food. If I was late, the bank had already transferred it to my budget account, in order to pay my bills. (Danish single mother, subsidized employment, two teenage boys).

The interviews indicate the dependency of families receiving social security, and demonstrate that the lack of punctuality of the institution making the payment adds to the experience of financial vulnerability. At a more abstract level, this suggests a discrepancy between the tight connection of timing and spending experienced by the low-income families, and other prevailing modes of money, where timing is less important.

## Intra-household distribution – differentiated values

Confirming British and Canadian research by [Kempson \(1996\)](#) and [Kempson et al. \(1994\)](#) and [Power \(2005\)](#), all the interviewed families gave children's consumption the highest priority, often at the expense of clothes and other fairly basic necessities such as the dentist and medicine for the parents. The differences between levels of consumption within the family are so great and point so clearly in the direction of unequal distribution of resources within the family that one must question present concepts of a common level of income for all members of a household. This unequal distribution actually corresponds to what the [Kochuyt \(2004\)](#) calls the creation of 'artificial poverty' for the parents along with 'artificial affluence' for the children within the same family. The interviews also revealed the 'artificial poverty' as gendered, as almost all examples of a parent cutting down on personal expenses suggest that the mother is the most economically disadvantaged person in the household. As [Singh](#)

(1997) and [Nyman \(2002\)](#), among others, emphasize, women tend to regard their own personal spending as *less urgent* than men do.

Following is a typical example:

It is more difficult to spend money on myself than it is to spend [money] on my children. I say to myself, 'No, you can wait. The children need this and that ...' I end up forgetting myself.  
(Danish, single working mother, two children)

Other research on intra-household finances confirms this tendency towards gender inequality within the household ([Pahl, 1989](#), 2000, 2002; Goode, Callender and Lister, 1998; [Vogler, 2005](#)). Although this study also found examples of fathers cutting down on important necessities, such as going to the dentist, these examples were far fewer.

Income and expenditure in families with small incomes are thus marked according to varying principles that appear to be greatly important to the experience of the sustainability of their budget. In addition, the economic dimension of money also figures in conjunction with moral concepts of what 'one ought' to spend money on.

## From economic to moral dilemmas – a gendered space of exclusion

In families with little money the consumption pattern is characterised in principle by the absence of spare money. Many simultaneously depend on social payments in the form of cash benefits, early retirement pension or other forms of transfer income, and in a number of cases the household consists of one parent (usually a woman) and children. Within this group of single mothers (as well as for several of the married women), money and the choice of consumption tends to be dominated by moral discourses, and the women in these families experience a migration of economic problems into the moral field. Most of these moral dilemmas concern the priorities given to sensible consumption such as buying food, clothes and other basic necessities, as opposed to what one might call 'the extra and desirable', such as entertainment and brand-name clothes and/or activities or commodities socially regarded as a whole as being 'normal'. What is necessary is regarded both as what is right and what is unreasonably pared down, as compared with what is desirable, ie, regarded as illegitimate 'for us with very little money' at the same time as it is actually being regarded as reasonable. The experience of these mothers relative to their budget suggests that even though they give priority to basic necessities simultaneously regard their choice as the most reasonable way to spend their money, they do not really regard this prioritization of sensible spending as sufficient:

I would like to give them [my children] something different, a little more ... Sometimes, when I look in the cupboard I think it's a bit bare ... I would really like to give them a little more ... but

it isn't possible ... sometimes I feel sorry for them ... I think that they ought to have some of the things that other children get ...

(Danish mother on income support, two children)

In this way dilemmas often arise over the prioritization of the family's resources, which on the one hand should be spent on food and rent but on the other hand should also give, especially the children, the possibility of participating in social activities with their friends. In addition, to spend money on things that do not comply with the narrow definition of 'necessity', eg smoking, also leads to emotional conflicts and feelings of shame.<sup>3</sup> These conflicted feelings can lead to difficult deliberations, and sometimes the right choice hardly seems to exist. The following quote highlights the narrow moral space of operation that these mothers experience:

Well, we just can't do it ... because we need all the money we've got. But we did it, even though we needed the money for something else - I couldn't bear saying 'No, we can't afford it.' So we have just been to Tivoli<sup>4</sup> and spent a lot of money ... And now, what are we going to eat?

(Danish mother on income support and with two small children)

Decisions concerning the spending of money in such cases end up involving feelings and moral considerations in connection with trying to operate between conceptions of wrong consumption and right consumption, in a situation in which no solution that is both morally and economically acceptable exists. Therefore, the idea of 'freedom of choice' does not make sense here. On the one hand, consumption is guided by a moral discourse, emphasizing the consumption of basic necessities and presupposing a widespread earmarking of resources for such 'necessary' consumption, while on the other hand a parallel moral discourse appears, suggesting the urgency of another pattern of consumption. Because the two are not compatible, as these quotes have emphasized, each woman therefore experiences *any choice* as a personal failure. In particular, where the children are concerned, as children's consumption is linked to parents' ideas of social inclusion, giving priority only to basic material needs seems inadequate. Therefore, neither of the available choices is both economically and morally acceptable, and a feeling that the wrong money is spent on the wrong consumption prevails. Thus money earmarked for basic necessities time and again will have to be spent on things or activities that are not - yet are still regarded as being - socially necessary. In this way, economic decisions often result in moral problems involving guilt and shame.

In contrast, the middle-class families not only gave *different* answers in terms of spending patterns, range of affordable shops, and access to and use of various forms of money and finance, but they also talked about their consumption in terms suggesting *a very different set of emotions* surrounding their consumption. The interviews with middle-class families would often be joyful and easy; particularly

when both husband and wife were present, they would make jokes about each others' spending. One husband suggested that his wife was about to receive a gold medal for spending, and a wife told a story of how her husband was supposed to buy food for a dinner party and came home with a DVD player instead. In addition, middle-class parents appeared less concerned with the social aspects of their and their children's' consumption and on the whole did not feel that their or their children's spending patterns were exposed to the moral judgement of others. In striking contrast, in the group of low-income families and in particular mothers, in line with [Skeggs\(1997\)](#), the ideal of 'being respectable' was much more largely linked to consumption. In short, not only did the low-income parents have problems making ends meet, but their ways of doing so were both – to others and themselves – inscribed in a moral discourse that left them with a very limited space of legitimacy as consumers.

## Conclusion

In light of the Danish and Swedish interview data, criticism of the lack of consideration given in consumption research to economic inequality, moral and political discourse, and money is very much to the point. Economic considerations figure prominently in families with little money. At the same time, however, limited financial resources are important not only in the traditional economic sense. Empirical studies tend more to indicate that limited access to money in a quantitative sense demands what Zelizer denotes as widespread qualitative 'earmarking' and division of the money into specific 'social currencies' intended for specifically determined purposes.

This earmarking concerns the dividing up of the money one has according to specific aims that in particular consider the needs of the children. In addition, this earmarking is used for restricting expenditure, eg by taking only a specified amount of money in one's purse when going shopping. At the same time both the value of money and the way it is earmarked vary in relation to monthly cycles. If any 'free money' exists at all, it will exist at the beginning of the month, not at the end. Finally, earmarking in itself represents a moral battlefield for poor families to the extent of experiencing conflicts and conflicting conceptions of their own, as well as of other people's ideas about what is correct earmarking. Poor families' consumption is a manifestation of the family's moral status, making it very difficult (sometimes impossible) for the family to distribute its financial resources in a way that they and others regard as legitimate. Whereas the dominating conceptions of the consumption society as a whole is characterized by ideas about freedom of choice, mobility and abstract and symbolic forms of money, the actual basis for the calculation of economic value in poor families appears based on completely different principles.

Having very little money is therefore important not only in terms of what one can afford to buy but also for conceptions of economic value, social status and moral legitimacy. A close interplay thus occurs between quantitative and qualitative money in families with limited financial resources. This interplay does not imply that the qualitative dimension of money is absent in families with more



money at their disposal, as evidenced by Zelizer's point that money always has a qualitative dimension, but rather that the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative dimensions is particularly important to the way in which poor families calculate their economic, social and moral latitude. In poor families, money is scarce, fixed and predetermined, and the family's experience of its overall budget is based on a combination of these dimensions. At the same time, poor families experience with ambivalence the earmarking of money in relation to the family's wishes and needs. They find themselves forced to predetermine the money they spend for specific purposes while at the same time being unable to regard these purposes as either reasonable or legitimate.

Economic vulnerability and poverty are therefore experienced in these families *not only as the effects of having too little money* but also as being linked to the feeling of *having the wrong kind*. We need to understand these feelings in the sense that when the money is earmarked for basic necessities, primarily food and clothes, nothing is left for anything else (eg, an outing to the Tivoli Gardens), even though this alternative way of spending money is regarded as necessary for other reasons, such as the children's social well-being. That money is earmarked for specific purposes at all is, amongst other things, an attempt to ensure enough money for food, clothes, etc. for the rest of the month. But this logical and rational approach to 'sensible consumption' also means that there is no spare money and therefore no entrance to the consumerist universe dominating in surrounding society.

The need to earmark money also prevents low-income families from entering the electronic economy, because they fear losing control, as electronic monies are more difficult to control. In this way we may regard both the form that money takes and the differences in accessing consumer roles and consumer choices as new signifiers of social differences in consumerist society. The analysis of consumption patterns in low-income families points towards a more general social and cultural differentiation of the consumer society into several consumption regimes. These regimes are established, not through differences in social forms of expression, such as taste and style, but rather through a differentiated access to consumer markets, forms of finance and variegated concepts of money.

Consumers in bad financial straits tend to have consumer habits and ways of handling money that in decisive areas clash with dominant conceptions in consumption studies: freedom of choice, a bias towards spectacular consumption, consumption as essentially symbolic, and consumption as amoral and essentially fun.

A renewed focus on 'ordinary' consumption (Gronow and Warde, 2001) as well as on the neo-liberal assumptions in consumption discourse ([Lodziak, 2002](#); [Löfgren, 1996](#)) is therefore both empirically and theoretically necessary. It is empirically necessary because consumers with little money must give priority to the daily consumption of basic needs while finding that others experience and socially construct and question their consumption choices in terms of moral judgement and legitimacy. Finally, a renewed empirical focus on market services and new forms of money and credit is necessary, because scarce economic resources not only determine a very specific consumption practice but also

increasingly clash with existing public discourses and market services in contemporary European society.

The study of the meaning of money in low-income households also emphasizes the need for a renewal of the theoretical framework of consumption. Such a rethinking is necessary not only because consumption patterns are socially and economically constrained but also because acting as a consumer follows a different pattern for consumers with low-incomes. Here the presumed connection between 'lifestyle' and consumption patterns, and more generally the assumption that consumption is a marker of taste, may come into question, linking status to morality and legitimacy. A framework that combines a perspective on financial exclusion with a focus on consumption patterns may contribute to resolving some of the empirical and theoretical bias in the field of consumption studies.

## Footnotes

1 Zelizer develops her theory on the meaning of money most explicitly in her 1997 book, which I use in greater detail. In the empirical analysis, I also draw upon her later analysis of the process of negotiating the connection between intimacy and economic activity within the household ([Zelizer, 2005](#)).

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2 This amounts to what remains after the payment of bills, eg rent, utilities, and taxes.

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3 For a discussion of the role of smoking for women, see [Graham 1993](#).

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4 Copenhagen's popular amusement park.

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