DINNER FOR ONE:
A Grounded Theory of Consumption in the Single-Person Household

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ABSTRACT:
As of the 2005 American Community Survey, there are over 30 million men and women in the United States that live alone. As a group, little attention has been paid to the single person who lives alone and how such a living arrangement effects the various decisions such individuals make. To this point, much of the work has focused on how these people transition from their single state into a married or cohabiting one; however, the single person is also a marginalized entity within a culture that assumes marriage is the natural state of adulthood. As such, my purpose is to explore the process of household decision making and consumption in the never-married, single-person household. To that end, I will pursue this purpose and attempt to answer my research questions via a grounded theory approach that seeks to generate a substantive theory of consumption in the single-person household, utilizing grocery shopping as the context in which it is studied. This dissertation proposal introduces the topic of and the problems faced by the single-person household, develops the guiding research question and various subquestions to be explored within the proposed study, and outlines my plan of research.
CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION

Al Pratt’s adult life started out a fairly normal one. He moved out of his parents’ home while he was in his twenties. He went to college, and he worked for the same small business for a number of years. He dated. He made and kept friends. He even had his own radio show in the early nineties where he played the punk music that he loves so much. In short, he lived a life that people in their twenties are supposed to lead. He was finding out who he was and who he was going to be, and just as Schwartzberg, Berliner, and Jacob (1995) note, he was managing the process of restructuring his relationship with his family to one that left him autonomous and independent. He planned on exiting his twenties a fully realized adult with a woman by his side to share his life, to grow old with him, and, perhaps, to raise children with. But, as John Lennon (1980) once sang, “Life is just what happens to you, while you’re busy making other plans.”

To save a little money, he moved back into his parents’ home in 1994. His plan was to stay six months; however, both of his parents had been struck by Alzheimer’s disease and had reached a point where both of them needed outside help just to get through the daily process of life. Without consulting his siblings, who were both married and had families of their own, Al took it upon himself to take care of his parents and make sure they were as comfortable as possible as the disease advanced. Within three years of taking on the caretaker role, Al’s father was killed after he wandered off one night and stepped in front of a truck. After that, his mother’s health declined considerably to the point where the parent/child roles had reversed and, in many ways, Al felt like he was taking care of a baby instead of the mother who raised him. She passed away in the late fall of 2002.

It was, in many ways, a noble sacrifice on Al’s part. His parents’ illness proved to be the final factor that prompted him to quit his academic pursuits so that he could focus more on their
care. The circle of friends he had before taking on this role slowly married off and dwindled as time passed until he was left wondering what happened to them. While his father was still alive, he could and did date, but that too fell by the wayside as time progressed and his mother grew sicker and sicker. Then, after his mother died, his siblings abandoned him, leaving him, as he puts it, “without any family.” When so many others his age are married and raising children, are embedded in careers that keep them happy and healthy, and are planning for a retirement that is still far enough off to be a dream, Al is working in a collectibles shop for an hourly wage with only a cat at home to keep him company. At forty-one years of age, Al Pratt is alone in the world. He is, as he very matter-of-factly states, “as single as single can be.”

**INVESTIGATING THE SINGLE PERSON HOUSEHOLD**

As of 2005, the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (2006) reports that the number of households that reported a traditional notion of family with the male-female couple at its core has slipped to about 55.2 million households or about 49.8 percent of the total number of households in the country. Of the remaining 55.8 million, about 19 million were inhabited by single-parent families and the remaining 36.8 million were considered non-family households. Included within those non-family households are more than 30 million unmarried men and women who, like Al, live by themselves (Kniazkov 2006). This number, of course, includes many individuals who have been married and are now divorced, widowed, separated, or simply living apart from a spouse due to extenuating circumstances as well as those individuals who have simply never married.

This is indicative of a continuing trend in American culture; more and more individuals are, for one reason or another, living alone. Glick (1994) reported that single-person households
grew by 120 percent between 1970 and 1992 and that 24 million single-person households accounted for nearly a quarter of all households in 1992. As pointed out by the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), that number has risen again to account for nearly 30 percent of all households in the United States. It is clear that the single-person household is a growing phenomenon. As various researchers (see for example Popenoe 1993; Skolnick 1991; Teachman, Tedrow, and Crowder 2000) openly discuss the perceived decline or, at the very least, the changing structure of the American family, it is clear that households and household decision making may need to be reconsidered as well.

Despite an early effort by Ezell and Russell (1985), the domain of marketing has yet to explore fully the consumption habits of the single-person household despite its rapid growth as a household type, and this trend is echoed in other disciplines such as psychology and sociology. Indeed, much of the literature in these two domains typically focuses on the single person who seeks a mate for marriage and child-rearing purposes (see for example Lichter, Anderson, and Hayward 1995; Schoen and Cheng 2006; Shackelford, Schmitt, and Buss 2005; Sweeney and Cancian 2004). This is also mirrored in the scant marketing literature that deals with dating (Belk and Coon 1993; Bernard, Adelman, and Schroeder 1991; Patterson and Hodgson 2006; Simonson 2005; Yurcison, Watchravisringkan, and McCabe 2005); however, single-person households, as Al can attest to, must also clean their homes, purchase cars, pay bills, make housing and housing-related decisions, and so many other consumption activities that go along with those dating or mate-selection practices. Furthermore, as Al can also attest to, his status as a single person plays a part in many of those activities.

For instance, when Al goes to the grocery store, he is intimately aware of his single status as he moves through the market, seeing deals for bulk items or “buy one get one free”
promotions in which, because he does not want to waste food or money, he can not participate. Also, since most cookbooks are written for with multiple servings in mind, Al may be forced to adjust the ingredient portions prior to the shopping excursion or, as is often the case, simply skip certain meals suggested by cookbooks or online recipes because he cannot adjust the ingredient portions. Additionally, Al refrains from purchasing something as mundane as celery because he knows that most of it will go to waste, and he feels gypped when he has to buy only two potatoes at the same price as a special on a bag of potatoes for the same reason. Essentially, Al feels punished for being single.

Or, a lot of times, especially with coupons, I don’t want to buy two just to save this much money. I just want to buy one. Why am I punished just because I need one? Well, a family could use two… or buy four. I don’t want four. It’s almost like… the only way you can take advantage of it, especially if it’s perishable, is if you’re in a family.

In many ways, this inability to take advantage of certain discount prices or to break bulk items into smaller quantities adds to Al’s feelings of alienation as he moves quietly through the grocery store, waiting patiently for the couples who are shopping together to move out of his way or eying the grocery carts full of meat and other items that are obviously intended for a family.

Al’s story is by no means generalizable to the population of single people in the U.S., but it does provide a number of challenges to many long-standing assumptions. One of the basic concepts of marketing and shopping is that an individual shopper is seeking, according to Archibald, Haulman, and Moody (1983, 347), “a ‘good buy,’ defined as a high quality product sold at a relatively low price.” Furthermore, according to Miller (1998), individuals seek to save money by shopping for the best possible deals, utilizing thrift as a moral barometer and a means by which to prove the shopper’s love for his or her family. However, because he is single and because he is also very conscious of the potential for waste for many of the items he shops for,
Al may be prevented in participating fully in the notion of shopping as saving. As a result of the quantity discounts available in stores, he may not be able to participate in some “good buys” and may, in fact, be punished with higher relative prices than his married counterparts.

Al’s story also challenges the traditional notion that women are the grocery shoppers within this culture. The literature dealing with shopping has gathered quite a bit of knowledge on how women shop. For instance, Jackson, McDaniel, and Rao (1985) examine the food shopping behaviors of working and non-working wives; Bagozzi, Baumgartner, and Yi (1992) explore variables impacting coupon usage on an all female subject pool; and Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1990) examine the shopping experiences of housewives who are attempting to maintain some semblance of control over their activities within the marketplace. But we know very little about the male shopping experience. Is Al’s narrative one that many males experience while grocery shopping for themselves or, perhaps, for their families? Is Al’s process of grocery shopping like those of other males? For that matter, is it different from the housewives in the Thompson et al. (1990) piece? Whatever the answer, marketing needs to follow Zeithaml’s (1985) call to expand our notion of who shops and investigate differences between genders as well as marital and other family states.

Al’s story may also challenge or support the current research into household decision making which centers on the multiple-person, typically family-oriented household and not the single-person household. Like others have found in other contexts (i.e. Jackson et al. 1985; Thompson et al. 1990), Al views the grocery shopping activity as a nuisance that is both tedious and boring; however, at the same time, he does not have the familial influences weighing upon his food choices. The only immediate social influences upon his grocery shopping habits are those of Olive, his cat, and of the friends he occasionally cooks for. Given this context, how are
the various decision-making processes different from those of a family or multiple-person household? For that matter, what is the grocery shopping process that Al, and other singles that live alone, typically engages in?

That being said, the purpose of this dissertation is to begin the exploration of household decision making and consumption within the context of the single-person household. Household decision making is, in and of itself, a broad topic that covers a wide range of possible behaviors worthy of examination by themselves. As such, household decision making has been explored in a variety of contexts including financial planning and management (Ferber and Lee 1974; McConacha, Tully, and Walther 1993), resource allocation (Commuri and Gentry 2005), electronic appliance purchases (Beatty and Talpade 1994), housing purchases (Park 1982; Qualls 1987), and various other household items (Belch and Willis 2001; Davis and Rigaux 1974; Foxman, Tansuhaj, and Ekstrom 1989). For the sake of expedience (and my committee’s sanity), I will narrow my focus to the context of grocery shopping decisions and activities made by never-married individuals living alone, focusing on the process of shopping for groceries as a whole rather than on piecemeal portions of the behavior. To restate my purpose, then, I intend to explore the process of household decision making and consumption in the never-married, single-person household in the context of grocery shopping. In the next section, I provide an overview of the primary research questions that guide this dissertation and my study of the single-person household.

MOVING FORWARD

A central research question guides the bulk of this study, and, as Creswell (2007) suggests, it is “open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional” (107) meaning that, though it guides
the research and provides the study with its overarching vision, it leaves room for a variety of subquestions that will come and go as the study progresses. These subquestions, according to Stake (1995), help to tease out the problems inherent within the object of study as well as aid in the development and description of information associated with the phenomenon. However, given the nature of the study at hand, I begin with the understanding that the central research question may evolve over the course of the study (Charmaz 2006; Goulding 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The primary research question asks: *Given the conditions faced by the single-person household in terms of perception, financial resources, household labor, culture, and otherwise living alone, what is the process through which consumption in the single-person household is enacted?* The question will be explored from a grounded theory approach that seeks to generate a substantive theory of consumption in the single-person household, utilizing grocery shopping as the context in which it is studied.

With such a substantive theory, I hope to contribute to the domain of marketing on both a theoretical and practical level. On a theoretical level, the study of consumption in the single-person household may provide valuable insight into how individuals actually make decisions without the direct influence of others living in the household. The resulting grounded theory may then be used as a basic building block for an overarching theory of consumption in the single person household that may then be utilized to study other shopping endeavors such as furniture shopping, clothes shopping, and even house or apartment shopping. Additionally, a process model of grocery shopping in the single person household may then be utilized in the development of a substantive theory of grocery shopping that accounts for all different household types. On a practical level, this dissertation may provide insight into a growing demographic group that can then be utilized by marketing managers to develop products that
match the needs of single people, by marketing communicators to develop messages appropriate for the single person, and retail managers to establish promotional efforts that speak to the needs of the single-person household. Marketing would do well to begin the process of integrating the single person who lives alone into research efforts in order to understand consumers better in general and the context of the single person specifically. This dissertation is an attempt to initiate that conversation. Ultimately, this study should result in a variety of contributions to a variety of marketing domains such as retailing, marketing communications, marketing strategy, and consumer research as well as disciplines outside of marketing such as sociology and psychology.

In the next chapter, I provide a review of the literature that deals with the single-person household in the United States. Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally advised that the literature review be conducted after the independent analysis of the data collected by the researcher to allow for an uncontaminated view of the phenomenon being studied; however, a variety of researchers have challenged this notion, indicating that any researcher comes to the phenomenon with a certain amount of contamination from their previous studies, their conceptualization of the phenomenon, and even their own experiences (Charmaz 2006; Dey 1999; Layder 1998). That being said, Strauss and Corbin (1998) refine the earlier assessment of the literature review by suggesting that it may be utilized in the development and rationalization of research questions as well as increasing the sensitivity the research brings to the study. However, they also caution that such sensitivity may also inhibit the sense of creativity that the researcher must carry with him or her through the process of analyzing and coding the data.

As such, my intent with chapter two is to review the literature dealing with the single-person household in order to help contextualize this study, ultimately focusing on the never-
married individual who lives alone. The grocery shopping literature, however, will not be reviewed in this proposal. It will be used in the data analysis process as part of the constant comparison technique supported by Charmaz (2006), Glaser (1978, 1992, 2001), and Strauss and Corbin (1998). My approach to reviewing the single-person literature will also be in keeping with Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) original intent. I will not generate hypotheses, concepts, or a priori themes from the literature itself, letting those emerge from the data instead. However, I will use the literature to set up my primary research question and its accompanying subquestions.

In chapter three, I outline the process by which this study will be undertaken. The chapter will begin with an overview of the grounded theory approach to qualitative inquiry. I will then follow with an overview of my sampling and recruitment procedures, the data collection methods utilized within the study, my approach to coding and analysis of the data, and my procedures for maintaining the validity and reliability of the findings. I will then close the chapter with a bit of self-reflection, as suggested by Creswell (2007), positioning my self within the context of the study in order to bracket (Moustakas 1994) my own experiences with and understanding of the single-person household and grocery shopping.