

# Changes in Families' Organic Food Consumption

Riefer, A.<sup>1</sup> and Hamm, U.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Kassel/Department for Agricultural and Food Marketing, Witzenhausen, Germany

**Abstract—** According to recent research based on the theoretical concept of the family cycle it can be assumed that expenditures for organic food in families decline as children get older. For organic food marketing this raises the question to which extent organic food consumption in families is characterised by changes, when changes in families' organic food consumption appear over time and what the reasons for these changes are. The article presents theoretical background, research design and results of a qualitative study. Based on qualitative interviews which were analysed according to Grounded Theory it is found that consumers perceive changes in organic food consumption in terms of increase and decrease. As causal conditions for this, pregnancy, the feeding of babies with complementary food, children's adolescence, a new partner and a new situation in household income could be identified. The results point out how qualitative research can contribute to the completion of existing and the inspiration for future quantitative studies.

**Keywords—** Family Cycle, Organic Food, Qualitative Interviews

## I. INTRODUCTION

In many cases consumption behaviour is a phenomenon related to other persons rather than being a solistic event [1]. As consumption decisions and usage often occur in familial contexts and the family is an institution in which children and juveniles are socialised also in terms of consumption roles [2], families are of special interest for marketing and consumer behaviour research [3]. According to recent research based on the theoretical concept of the family life cycle it can be assumed that expenditures for organic food in families with children decline as children get older [4]. As an objective socio-demographic factor the family life cycle, however, lacks explanatory power about reasons for possible changes in the consumption of organic food over time. Therefore investigating the relationship of the

objective situations of single family cycle stages and consumption behaviour requires including aspects of subjective relevance for consumers in terms of values, attitudes and motives [2]. Considering the consumption of organic food products, it is already known that biographic transition phases can induce new motives and by this changes in organic food consumption [5]. However, detailed knowledge about changes in organic food consumption does not exist. The article here presents theoretical background, research design and results of an explanatory research aiming at the construction of a substantive theoretical concept in order to explain to which extent organic food consumption in families is characterised by changes, when changes in families' organic food consumption appear over time and what the reasons for these changes are.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For the question of research it can be reverted to market research studies dealing with consumption behaviour in regard to organic food. Broader theoretical concepts are the family cycle and the role of family members with regard to consumption decisions of households, both being adopted by consumer research from social sciences.

### A. Organic Food Consumption in Families

Considering results of a household panel with organic food consumers run by the German market research institute GfK, it becomes apparent that expenditures for organic food done by young couples without children are significantly lower than their share of population. Younger families with toddlers only have a slightly higher share of expenditures for organic food in comparison to their share of population while younger families with school children have a significant higher share of

expenditures for organic food. Expenditures of families with juvenile children, however, significantly lie under their share of population [4]. Based on this cross-section analysis of organic food consumption according to different life cycle stages the assumption arises that the demand for organic food in families decreases with the transition of the eldest child from the age of a schoolchild to the age of a juvenile child. Taking into account the striking market share of organic baby food in jars of approximately 60% in Germany [6], it has to be assumed that with the transitioning from toddler to schoolchild age it does not work so far as to win families over for organic food on the long term [7]. Regarding reasons for organic food consumption, there is good evidence that care motives make organic food purchase more likely [8]. Kropp et al. found that events such as the founding of a household, partnership, pregnancy or childbirth, scandals, illnesses or retirement can result in a change of diet patterns [5].

### *B. Role of Family Members*

In general, the purchase of fast moving consumer goods such as food products is highly habitual behaviour. If purchasing decisions are related to more than one person, as in a family, divisions of labour and competences can be common patterns of habitual purchasing behaviour. It is assumed that interaction processes in families then are strongly manifested in particular separation of roles. Interactions thereby can function in an easier way on the one side since certain procedures do not have to be negotiated repeatedly. On the other side this means that true processes of decision take place rarely [1]. In this context Blackwell et al. distinguish five roles in simple purchasing decision processes in families (initiator, influencer, decider, buyer and user) [9].

Based on the results of empirical studies dealing with the influence of family members, product type, particular attributes of products, stage of purchasing process and family cycle emerge as differentiating factors. For instance, men dominate purchasing decisions about technical, financial or outside used goods [10]. Women are often responsible for expenditures related to children's upbringing, such as children's wear or food [11]. Children have a high influence on purchasing decisions with regard to

products they consume themselves (i.e. cereals, snacks, toys) [12, 13]. In the course of the family cycle purchasing decisions are often done more jointly in younger couples' households than in established ones of more than one person [11]. Older children have a significantly higher influence on purchasing decisions than younger ones because of further developed cognitive skills and consumption experiences [13].

### *C. Family Cycle*

A family cycle is a schematically and chronically progressing of particular forms of the family. Starting point of this theoretical concept is the idea that families run through particular phases [14, 15]. Each stage of the family cycle is characterised by particular needs and necessities [16]. In most family cycle concepts endogenous events (i.e. adding or drop out of children or couples) as well as exogenous events (i.e. occupational status of men, educational stage of children) are used to distinguish different phases [17]. The number of the family stages strongly depends on the particular research interest. Considering the consumption behaviour of families, family cycle models are considered which are based on children's age [18].

Investigating the influence of the family cycle on food purchasing decisions it has been found out that particular diet-related behaviour is highly determined by the family cycle. Thus, in families of family cycle stage one for both, men and women, personal health was the most important factor for food purchasing decisions followed by other aspects, such as financial costs or body weight. In contrast to this, the vast majority of all investigated influencing factors turned out to be less important in families of stage two [19]. Schaninger and Lee found that families in the beginning and families in the end of the full nest (the period of time when there are children in a household) differ in their food consumption behaviour. So, older households with young children consumed comparatively more healthy food and a smaller amount of sugar, junk food and convenience products. In contrast, families with schoolchildren consumed the highest amount of junk food and families with teenage children the highest amount of meals taken outside, fast food, deep frozen pizzas and TV dinners [20].

### III. METHODS

The research question pertains to a subject area of which only little is known so far. This requires a methodological approach that allows an exploration of new knowledge.

#### A. Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen which is structured in three waves of data collection and analysis with 6 to 12 interviews each (fig. 1).

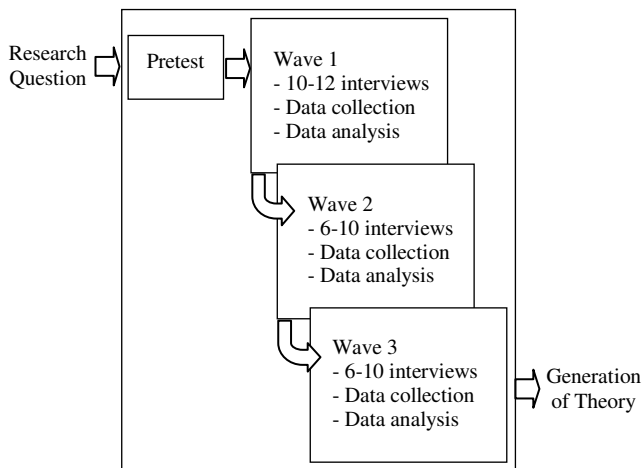


Fig. 1 Research Process

The structuring in several phases of data collection and analysis permits adapting new sampling criteria based on the knowledge gained in previous data analyses. The research design is orientated in the broadest sense on the so-called theoretical sampling according to Glaser and Strauss which is a process of data collection focused on the generation of theory. Thereby the researcher simultaneously collects, codes and analyses data as well as decides which data has to be collected next and where to find it. This process is stopped by the time theoretical saturation is achieved [21]. Based on particular theoretical assumptions, for the first wave of data collection interviews were conducted with 11 parents who are mainly responsible for food purchasing in their household, who come from households where organic food has been purchased frequently for a longer period of time and who have at least one child of 12 to 18 years. Since the interest of the project focuses on the analysis of the

development of organic food consumption in families in the time between birth and teenager age of the children, parents were determined as relevant informants. The perspective of children in the sense of a multi-perspective approach of family related questions [3] was neglected as these can only report about a shorter period of time. Since respondents should have expertise for the purchasing behaviour of the family with regard to food, only persons responsible for food purchase in households with children were included.

#### B. Data Collection

Data was collected with problem-centred interviews [22] of 2 to 2.5 hours. Exploring changes in a social phenomenon over time such as the consumption of a fast moving consumer good might be very difficult by means of a purely narrative interview. Here problem-centred interviews allow the interviewee to narrate the development of organic food consumption and the interviewer to guide the interview at the same time. Due to this, problem-centred interviews overcome the alleged contrast between the principal of openness and theoretical guidance as knowledge is gained by a combination of deduction and induction. Thus, the respondent narratively explores his subjective view on a problem on the one hand; on the other hand the interviewer completes this with requests based on the interview guideline and conceptual ideas [22]. According to Witzel problem-centred interviews were designed as a combination of short questionnaire, interview guideline, postscript and audio recording. In this connexion the short questionnaire served to acquire socio-demographic data which is important for the understanding of the household's situation (number, sex, age, education and state of employment of the family members). The postscripts were used to capture contents of conversations before and after the audio recording as well as to capture attributes of interview situation [22]. Additionally respondents were asked to depict the development of their organic food consumption by means of a graph with timeline which served as basis for validation during the interview and afterwards for data analysis since turning points could be identified more easily.

### C. Data Analysis

As basis for data analysis the audio recorded interviews were transcribed according to standard orthography and analysed by dint of the software programme atlas.ti. Since theory building is the defined goal of investigation Grounded Theory was chosen as method of data analysis. According to Strauss and Corbin a coding procedure including open, axial and selective coding was chosen. By open coding text is split and emerging ideas and events are tagged with conceptual names. These concepts are then summarised and reduced in number to categories [22]. Categories emerging from open coding are related to each other in the course of axial coding which targets the compilation of a phenomenon related model of relation [24]. According to the so-called coding paradigm (fig. 2), a general causal action model which serves the deduction of general assertions, categories are further structured by defining them as phenomenon, causal condition, context, intervening conditions, strategies of action or consequences of action [25]. Finally, by selective coding one core category which can be set into relation with all other categories is identified [23].

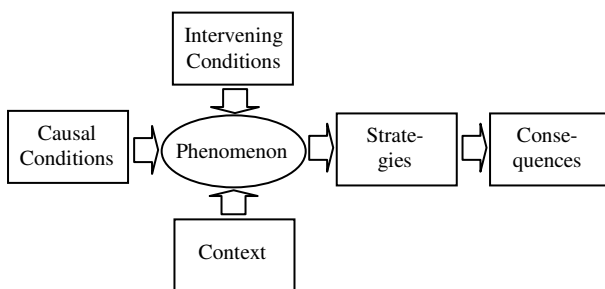


Fig. 2 Coding Paradigm according to Strübing [24]

## IV. RESULTS

Regarding the question to which extent organic food consumption in families underlies changes, data analysis shows that consumers perceive organic food consumption not as a continual progress but rather as being characterised by changes in terms of increase and decrease of organic food consumption. Underlying reasons for these changes are outlined in the following.

### A. Increase in Organic Food Consumption

Changes in organic food consumption in terms of an increase of consumption emerged in the context of alimentary requirements of pregnant women and for babies' complementary diet.

*Alimentary requirements of pregnant women:* Causal condition for an increase of organic food consumption in the case of the phenomenon of alimentary requirements of pregnant women is the event of the pregnancy. For instance one interviewee had bought food exclusively in conventional grocery shops up to the point of her first pregnancy when she started buying organic food. Another woman had consumed organic food before getting pregnant; however, on being pregnant organic food consumption increased. The increase of organic food consumption here is explained by understanding organic food as healthier and fewer residues of chemical treatments. *Interviewee 9:* "Yes and when I was pregnant with my daughter, well we did pay a bit more attention to that. [...] And then we certainly saw to it that we mainly live on organic food [...]."

*Alimentary requirements for babies' complementary diet:* Other changes in organic food consumption in terms of an increase appear in relation with the alimentary requirements for babies' complementary diet. Based on the data analysis the causal condition for this phenomenon is the transition of babies into the stage of being fed with complementary food. Thus, the first purchase of organic food of one interviewee was meant for the preparation of an organic baby puree for her son. In retrospect the consumption of organic food products was understood as a diet of high health value, as a diet without chemical residues and containing whole meal food. This phenomenon as the one of alimentary requirements of pregnant women is in line with the results of cross-sectional studies like the one mentioned above according to which care motives such as health value and absence of chemical residues can underlie organic food consumption of pregnant women and mothers of young children [8]. *Interviewee 1:* "[...] when you start to cook for a toddler, you buy the organic carrots, you don't take the normal carrots, you just take the organic carrots and the organic apples."

### B. Decrease of Organic Food Consumption

In contrast to phenomena resulting in an increase of organic food consumption others comprehend strategies and actions affecting a decrease of organic food.

*Alimentary requirements of juvenile children:* Changes in organic food consumption in terms of a decrease can appear with new alimentary requirement of juvenile children caused by children's adolescence. According to this phenomenon children develop own food wants with their transition into adolescence which can differ from their parents'. Thereby particularly organic sweets, salty food snacks and chocolate spreads are rejected and conventional ones preferred. Depending on intervening conditions such as product type, product attribute and consuming situation parents do or do not realise children's alimentary wants. The phenomenon corresponds with the theoretical assumptions seen above stating that juvenile children do have stronger direct influence on family purchase decisions than younger children [13]. *Interviewee 2: "[...] and then I would say, here you have a slight break downwards when my son got to his adolescent phase as additional purchases increased a bit perhaps."*

*Alimentary requirements of a new partner:* Another phenomenon of subjective relevance for the explanation of changing organic food consumption can be the alimentary wants of a new partner. Causal condition for the decrease of organic food consumption in this case can consist in a new partner moving into the already existing household. For instance one interviewee's partner rejected organic products, the food coop the interviewee bought organic food and its customers. This was the reason why the interviewee opted out of the coop and bought conventional as well as organic food for some time. Referring to the theoretical background [11], here it could be assumed that as in households of younger couples, in newly formed older households consumption habits have also to be established. *Interviewee 11: "And so I really bought there exclusively until I met my current partner. So I split up with the father of my child and my new partner and I moved in together [...]. So then it [the purchase of organic food] went down slowly."*

*Differing household income:* Changes in organic food consumption also arise in relation to changes in the situation of income. Thus, in some cases interviewees describe that due to their partners' unemployment organic food consumption was limited. *Interviewee 7: "Because here Hartmud was unemployed and then started his apprenticeship and then we were short of money. [...] And then this attitude came up a bit here, too, we have to save and not buy expensive organic food [...]."*

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The qualitative empirical findings presented here give a deeper understanding of organic food consumption in families over time than pure quantitative family cycle data. Moreover, they contribute to the completion and the development of the theoretical concept of the family cycle. Indeed particular transitions between one life cycle stage and the other, as the transition from young couple household to full nest households and from full nest households with school children to full nest households with juvenile children, assign points in family life lines which can be causal conditions for changes in organic food consumption (alimentary requirements of pregnant women, alimentary requirements of juvenile children). Other points of changes like the transition of a split one parent household into a full nest household, as represented in the causal condition of the phenomenon alimentary requirements of new partners, might be included in particular life cycle models [26] but not into all family cycle models used in market research. Other magnitudes for the structuring of the family life cycle such as the age of children might be included in life cycle models already, however they require another kind of categorisation. With regard to the research object, beyond the differentiation between toddlers, schoolchildren and juveniles, here an additional differentiation between babies getting no complementary diet and those already getting a complementary diet would be necessary. Moreover, there are causal conditions of particular phenomena of change in organic food consumption which are not included in the existing family cycle, however, which turn out to be of particular importance as in the case of the causal condition of unemployment.

## REFERENCES

1. Wiswede G (2000a) Konsumsoziologie - Eine vergessene Disziplin. Rosenkranz D, Schneider N F (2000) Konsum. Opladen, Leske und Budrich, p 23-72
  2. Kroeber-Riel W, Weinberg P (2003) Konsumentenverhalten. 8th ed., München, Vahlen
  3. Commuri S, Gentry J W (2000) Opportunities for Family Research in Marketing. Academy of Marketing Science Review, vol. 2000, no. 8, p 1-34
  4. Michels P, Müller H, Schmanke A (2004) Strukturen der Nachfrage nach ökologischen Nahrungsmitteln in Deutschland. Materialien zur Marktberichterstattung. Vol. 53, Bonn, ZMP Zentrale Markt- und Preisberichtsstelle für Erzeugnisse der Land-, Forst- und Ernährungswirtschaft GmbH
  5. Kropp C, Sehrer W, Brunner K-M, Engel A (2005) Verbraucherinnen - Neue Chancen für Bio-Konsum. Brand K.-W. (2005) Von der Agrarwende zur Konsumwende. Effekte der Ausweitung des Bio-Marktes entlang der Wertschöpfungskette. Berlin, agit-druck, p 37-46
  6. Agromilagro Research (2007) Umsatzanteil von Bio an Gesamt nach Warengruppen in Deutschland im Jahr 2006 im LEH. <http://www.agromilagro.de/resources/UmsatzanteileACN2006.pdf>, 2008-02-14
  7. Spiller A, Lüth M. (2004) Determinanten zum Kaufverhalten von Konsumenten (Qualitative Daten). Leitzmann, C. et al. Praxishandbuch Bio-Lebensmittel. Hamburg, Behr's Verlag, chapter V-2.2.1
  8. Emnid (2007) Ökobarometer 2007. [http://www.oekolandbau.de/fileadmin/redaktion/dokumente/journalisten/publikationen/OEkobarometer\\_07.pdf](http://www.oekolandbau.de/fileadmin/redaktion/dokumente/journalisten/publikationen/OEkobarometer_07.pdf), 2008-02-14
  9. Blackwell R D, Miniard P W, Engel J F (2001) Consumer Behavior. 9th ed., Mason, South Western
  10. Wiswede G (2000b) Einführung in die Wirtschaftspsychologie. 3rd ed., München, UTB
  11. Hawkins D J, Best R J, Coney K A (2001) Consumer Behavior: Building Marketing Strategy. 8th ed., Boston et al., Irwin Mc Graw-Hill
  12. Levy D S, Lee C K-C (2004) The influence of family members on housing purchase decisions. Journal of Property Investment & Finance, vol. 22, no. 4, p 320-338
  13. Mangleburg T F (1990) Childrens' Influence in Purchase Decisions. A Review and Critique. Advances in Consumer Research, vol. 17, p 813-825
  14. Reinhold G, Lamnek S, Becker H (2000) Soziologie-Lexikon. 4th ed., München and Wien, R. Oldenburg Verlag
  15. Fuchs-Heinritz W (1994) Familienzyklus. Fuchs-Heinritz W et al. Lexikon der Soziologie. 3rd ed., Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, p 200
  16. Hill P B, Kopp J (2001) Familiensoziologie: Grundlagen und theoretische Perspektiven. 3rd ed., Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften
  17. Scheller G (1989): Familienzyklus als Forschungsansatz. Nave-Herz R, Markefka M: Handbuch der Familien- und Jugendforschung. Band 1: Familienforschung. Neuwied et al., Luchterhand, p 151-162
  18. Nave-Herz R (2005) Der Familienzyklus als empirischer Forschungsansatz. Busch F W, Nave-Herz R: Familie und Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Familienforschung. Oldenburg, Bibliotheks- und Informationssystem der Universität, p 207-218
  19. Schafer R B, Keith P M (1981) Influences on food decisions across the family life cycle. Journal of the American Dietetic Association, vol. 78, February 1981, p 144-148
  20. Schaninger C M, Lee D H (2002) A New Full-Nest Classification Approach. Psychology & Marketing, vol. 19, n. 1, p 25-58
  21. Glaser B G, Strauss A L (2005) Grounded Theory. Strategien qualitativer Forschung. 2nd ed., Bern, Verlag Hans Huber
  22. Witzel A (2000): The problem-centred interview. Forum Qualitative Social Research, 1 (1), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-00/1-00witzel-e.htm>, 2008-02-08
  23. Strauss A, Corbin J (1990) Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques. Newbury Park et al., Sage
  24. Strübing J (2004) Grounded Theory. Zur sozialtheoretischen und epistemologischen Fundierung des Verfahrens der empirisch begründeten Theoriebildung. Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften
  25. Kelle U (1994) Empirisch begründete Theoriebildung. Zur Logik und Methodologie interpretativer Sozialforschung. Status Passages and the Life Course. Vol. 6. Weinheim, Deutscher Studien Verlag
  26. Gilly M C, Enis B M (1982) Recycling the family life cycle: A proposal for redefinition. Advances in Consumer Research, vol. 9, p 271-276
- Angelika Riefer
  - University of Kassel
  - Department of Agricultural and Food Marketing
  - Steinstr. 19
  - 37213 Witzenhausen
  - Gemany
  - a.riefer@uni-kassel.de