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ARTICLE

# The Missing Child in Consumption Theory

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### *Abstract*

Children are essentially invisible in theories of consumer society and culture, despite their presence and centrality in everyday life. In this article, I argue that children and childhood, and thus mothers and motherhood, must be acknowledged and investigated as constitutive of – rather than derivative of or exceptional to – commercial, consumer culture generally. The focus here is not on how to better accommodate children and childhood (and mothers and motherhood) within extant notions of consumption and consumer culture, but to begin to open up the field of consumption studies to the essential and non-negotiable presence of children and childhood throughout social life.

### *Key words*

children • consumer culture • economic man • motherhood • theory • women

**THEORIES OF CONSUMPTION** and consumer culture – like economic theory generally – do not know childhood. The problems, formulations and concepts arising out of consumption theory have failed to incorporate and account for the place, practices and existence of children in economic life to any significant degree. Highly influential and highly regarded scholars such as Thorstein Veblen, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Baudrillard, Colin Campbell, Daniel Miller, George Ritzer and Don Slater, among others, have crafted social, historical, structural and cultural accounts of the nature, rise

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and veracity of modern consumerism with hardly a mention of children or childhood. Beyond the efforts of individual theorists, children and childhood remain absent from or marginalized in a good deal of extant writing on consumption and consumer culture as evidenced, for instance, by their minimal presence or complete absence in edited collections about consumer society and popular culture (see Miller, 1995; Strasser et al., 1998; Gottdiener, 2000; Schor and Holt, 2000; Jenkins et al., 2002; Clarke et al., 2003; Trentmann, 2006) and in texts intended to expound on consumption in a theoretical manner (Lee, 1993; Lury, 1996; Miles, 1998; Boccock, 1993; Paterson, 2006).

At the same time, research and writing about the consumer preferences, culture and practices of children has, since the early 1990s, grown at what seems to be an exponential rate. Stephen Kline (1993), David Buckingham (2000), Ellen Seiter (1993), Marsha Kinder (1998), Dan Cook (2004a), Gary Cross (2004), Heather Hendershot (2004), Juliet Schor (2004), Elizabeth Chin (2001), Viviana Zelizer (2002) and Anne Allison (2006) are some of the more visible among sociologists, historians, communications scholars and anthropologists who are involved in rising tide of academic research and accompanying public interest in the issues surrounding children's engagement with, and place in, commercial life. Add to these notables the recent special issues of journals, mini-conferences and research projects being undertaken on children's consumption in North America and Europe<sup>1</sup> and my contention that consumption theory does not know or engage with children and childhood may appear quite dubious.

I have two points to make in this regard. First, studies of children's consumption have not yet coalesced into anything approaching a body of knowledge or field of study. The varied studies and publications tend to be identified with one another because of a categorical association – i.e. they address specifically *children's* consumption – regardless of differences in theory, method and approach. Books on children's consumption, for instance, are often reviewed together as if they are speaking about the same subject to the same audience, thereby reinforcing a kind of ghettoization of the topic.

Second, and in a related vein, the work in this arena has been, for the most part, intransitive. Any insights, formulations or problems arising out of the different studies of children's consumption have yet, to any significant degree, to be put into conversation with one another beyond some incremental, often fact-based additions to previous research. No doubt, such hard detailed work is needed and should be lauded. My concern here is that, with few exceptions (discussed later), scholars have not made a point

of situating children's consumption and the consumer culture of childhood in relation to 'consumption' in general and consumption theory specifically. Indeed, it is symptomatic of the situation I characterize that one can find little in the way of a community of criticism and critique among those in this area (but see Langer, 2004, 252–253; Martens et al., 2004).

We have then, on the one hand, major theorists and field-defining work and statements about consumer culture where children are hardly acknowledged as having a social existence. On the other hand, there exists a good deal of work on children and consumption which, with few exceptions, does not try to integrate insights about children's lives and worlds with the larger concerns about the nature, boundaries and exigencies of those multitudinous practices often gathered under the rubric of 'consumption'. I find it thus completely consistent both to recognize the existence and growth of studies about child and youth consumption and to claim that the area is neglected or otherwise under-considered. It is not a question of quantity of attention but of conceptual positioning and orientation.

I argue that children's presence and practices must be acknowledged and investigated as constitutive of – rather than derivative of or exceptional to – commercial, consumer culture generally. The attention here is devoted to children from birth or prior (see below) until about the age of 12 years, before 'children' become 'youth'. The intent is not simply about bringing children *into* the study of consumption (cf. Martens et al., 2004) or about better accommodating children and childhood *within* extant notions of consumer culture. My purpose in this article, rather, centers on offering a critique and analysis of theoretical treatments of consumption in light of the perspective gained when children and childhood – and, significantly, mothers and motherhood – are included unapologetically into the theoretical-conceptual mix. This effort hopefully begins a process of opening up the field of consumption studies to the essential and non-negotiable presence of children and childhood throughout social life. In so doing, I assert the necessity of recognizing children not merely as 'extra expenses' or appendages to a household budget but as vital and integral to the creation and deployment of the varied meanings surrounding the world of goods, presently and historically.

In the following discussion, I seek to open up theories of consumption by demonstrating just a few ways – out of the many possible – that children and childhood can inform and re-form thinking about consumer culture. First, I scrutinize the presence or absence of children and childhood in relation to a number of key theories and thinkers with the idea of illuminating some assumptions about the place and role of children/

childhood in their schemes. I make the somewhat surprising claim that in the midst of these culturally informed theories of consumption resides a ghost of sorts – that of *homo economicus* – an individualized, adult male figure who continues to animate neoclassical thought but who also lurks in and around theoretical accounts of *cultural* consumption. I then discuss how research and writing specifically examining children and consumption do not, in the main, bring their insights to bear upon the nature and contours of consumer culture generally, in part because of difficulties in conceptualizing the ‘child consumer’ outside of an individualistic frame.

As I intend to make clear, making children part of the epistemology of consumption will not be a simple additive endeavor whereby the constructs and considerations of the theories under scrutiny remain completely intact, but which merely append childhood to be absorbed into the conceptual blend. Recognizing children in this regard, rather, contributes something that extends beyond affixing little bodies, nagging purchase requests and diminutive products to the culture of consumption. I argue that recognizing and acknowledging the presence of children both as economic actors and as significant objects for consumption necessarily disrupts individualistic assumptions about economic action by bringing women, mothers and caretakers into the picture. Specifically, when children are acknowledged as social-economic actors and beings who are dependent in various ways on the actions of caretakers, the relational and co-productive nature of acquiring, having and displaying things becomes evident and unavoidable. Without consideration of children and childhood, understandings of consumer society will remain tethered to conceptualizations of individualized economic action assumed to take place for the enhancement of the self in the present. As well, absent children and childhood, the temporal dimensions of ‘consumption’ will remain chained mainly to the here and now, to the momentary constructions of identity and will continue to ignore the ways in which consumer culture reproduces *and* transforms itself through the lifecycle and over generations.

### A LOOK AT ‘CONSUMPTION THEORY’

It is important to note that there is no single ‘consumption theory’ *per se* which exists as an identifiable entity or body of knowledge. Rather, a number of complementary, overlapping and/or contradictory theoretical dispositions toward consumption and consumer culture characterize a continually developing field of scholarship. Well-known and oft-cited, many of these works and authors together comprise a common fund of

knowledge from which scholars draw and against which we position ourselves.

'The child', when present, performs a number of analytic functions in the theorizing of consumption. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1971[1899]), Thorstein Veblen argues that the incidence of a lower birthrate among the privileged classes stems from their need to use children as statements of their class status. 'The conspicuous consumption, and the consequent increased expense, required in the reputable maintenance of a child is very considerable and acts as a powerful deterrent [to having many children]. It is probably the most effectual of the Malthusian prudential checks' (1971[1899]: 113). Children here are props in a game of social positioning, the inclusion of which do not change the terms of the game.

Colin Campbell (1987) takes exception to Veblen's notion that consumption is singularly about competitive social display and to Weber's thesis that the rise of modern capitalism was based, initially at least, on an ascetic ethos. Campbell offers an alternative motivation for consumption arguing that hedonism – as in the seeking of pleasure – is the driving force of modern consumption. Modern hedonism (1987: 69–78) lives quite strongly in the imagination of individuals who can daydream about pleasures and identities (1987: 85–88). Modern consumption – made possible in part by the increasing affordability and variety of goods – thus serves as a means by which people dream (i.e. daydream) about scenarios of fulfilling desire. Hence, feelings of constant dissatisfaction, often noted by critics of consumer culture, are for Campbell outgrowths of something prior and more fundamental than consumer society – an imaginative longing for pleasures that can never be completely satiated.

Children make an appearance toward the end of Campbell's argument when the question of whether values, like the virtue of deferred gratification, can be instilled through child rearing. He asserts that such efforts only serve to stimulate day-dreaming and desire, ultimately leading to the development of a 'romantic personality' (1987: 222). In a discussion that is uninformed, ahistorical and cursory, Campbell exhibits no interest in or understanding of children as anything other than recipients of culture. They certainly are not producers or active interpreters of it. Ultimately, from these few paragraphs, one can glean that the 'romantic personality' for Campbell is not only historically ascendant, but it appears to be natural because it is the 'natural' reaction of the child – or at least of the 'child' he imagines. This 'child' serves Campbell's thesis as a way to universalize it by making claims to the naturalness of hedonism.<sup>2</sup>

In his *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), anthropologist Daniel Miller sets out to question the dominant view of subject–object relations and to revise it in terms of insights gained from material culture studies. He bases his discussion on the dynamic interchange between subjects and objects that occurs through a process of internalization and externalization, not in the grand historical sense that Hegel gave to it, but in the way that human subjects relate to culture ‘as an external form’ and ‘the artefact as the humanly produced, material object’ (1987: 28). Miller retrieves the concept of objectification – making things, including ideas and internal states, into externalized objects or forms – from the more standard Marxian notion of ‘alienation’.

He turns to Melanie Klein, the Austrian-born psychoanalyst and important 20th-century figure in the development of object relations theory, for a developmental perspective (1987: 90–5). Klein understands external objects – the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ breast, for instance – not as objective things but internal projections of a constructed world. The infant, in other words, does not merely confront the external world as given, but is active in creating that world from the start by internalizing and then re-externalizing it in the form of objects saturated with meaning and value. Miller sees in infancy something of an origin story about the subject–object dynamic; it is in a sense proof of the thesis that subjects and objects arise in tandem, not one before the other. Material culture and mass consumption are thus ultimately expressions, albeit quite complex and multifaceted, of human psychosocial nature.

Missing from Miller’s account is any specificity – historical, cultural or otherwise – to his conception of childhood or of children’s experiences. When does a child become a ‘consumer?’ How does that identity or practice relate to children as social subjects? Is consumption distinct from or in some way differentiated from interacting with material culture? Does children’s consumption have a character that is different from adult consumption or are these essentially the same because the subject–object dynamic is the same? We are not given the means to address these issues because the ‘child’ is a caricature, a conceptual prop in Miller’s scheme.

In Pierre Bourdieu’s decisive work, *Distinction* (1984[1979]), which is concerned with the generation and transmission of cultural dispositions, children and childhood appear only in a brief discussion of child rearing (pp. 368–9). Bourdieu – with a temperament similar to Campbell and Miller – makes brief mention, with no elaboration or theorization, that the values expressed through modes of child rearing are implicated in the inheritance of a new disposition of a ‘fun ethic’ of the body. For a theorist whose

project arose from the study of education and the reproduction of class and who developed the concept of the habitus as a way to avoid ossified subject/object/structure conceptual distinctions, the short shrift he gives to children/childhood is difficult to understand and accept. It is as if culture – or the culture that matters – exists only in and for adults, as do habitus and cultural capital, as if these suddenly materialize when one reaches the threshold of adulthood. Essentially, his entire conceptualization rests precariously on a simple, transparent and unconsidered notion that culture is, in some deep sense, unproblematically transmitted through childrearing.<sup>3</sup>

For Veblen, Campbell, Miller and Bourdieu, children and childhood are afterthoughts in their theoretical formulations. The child is made to ‘fit in’ with, or otherwise elaborate on, an already formulated conceptual structure and does not inform its construction. The ‘child’ nevertheless becomes a necessary part of the articulation of the argument. For Campbell, Miller and Bourdieu, in particular, the ‘child’ serves an ontogenic proxy – a necessary linkage that connects the explanatory processes under scrutiny (hedonism, subject–object relations, transmission of cultural dispositions) across the life course and over generations. In essence, these invocations of the child (or ‘development’) naturalize, by fiat, the conjectured psychocultural dynamics, with virtually no elaboration on specific process or contexts.

As slight and incomplete as they may seem, these treatments represent some of the most direct acknowledgement of children and childhood in what I have been referring to as general consumption theory. In other attempts to characterize consumption or consumer society as a whole, children/childhood are virtually invisible, barely mentioned in passing. In most other works, children and childhood often have an implied presence or, when mentioned explicitly, the discussion of their function in the larger argument remains superficial.

In Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood’s *The World of Goods* (1979), children and childhood dodge in and out of the shadows of their discussions about kinship and marriage (1979: 84–90), the sexual division of labor of the home (1979: 120–1) and economic spheres and household consumption (1979: 131–6) with only a mention here and there, but no analysis. They, like others, give no sense of specificity of children’s practices or experiences, and little hint of mothers’ location in the ‘system of information’ constructed by and through goods, but assume the process and, in so doing, imply a role for children and childhood.

George Ritzer’s, *The McDonaldization of Society* (1996), probably the most successful sociology book since David Riesman et al.’s *The Lonely*

*Crowd* (1950), makes no mention of children except in relation to the McDonaldization (i.e. rationalization) of birth (1950: 161–70). Yet, it is not a stretch to argue that there would be no McDonald's as we know it and perhaps no McDonaldization without children – that is, without living, breathing youngsters who visit there and enter into the imaginative domain created by the brand (Kincheloe, 2002). Children serve as the audience for the McDonaldland characters, the market for the Happy Meals and cross-promotions, the consumers of Big Macs, the users of the Playlands and a key impetus for adult patronage of the stores. Unanswered by Ritzer's formulations – because it is unasked – is how McDonaldization has contributed to producing key versions of childhood over the last half-century and how children have produced 'McDonald's'. Children and childhood require an explicit theoretical and conceptual presence to fully flesh out the dynamics and implications of McDonaldization, rather than existing simply through implication.

Except in the most basic sense, children do not make it to the level of an implication in Don Slater's *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (1997), wherein he offers otherwise excellent treatments of how consumption and consumer culture articulate with social and economic theory. One of his purposes is to demonstrate how the notion of a consumer culture elaborates on and extends ideas of consumer sovereignty and the self, of social meaning and economics, of culture generally as well as modernity itself. Except in passing, however, children or childhood do not live in Slater's consumer culture (see later); their selves and potential sovereignty are not at issue. He makes mention of youth, particularly youth subcultures in the UK's Birmingham School tradition of cultural studies, often represented by Stuart Hall, Paul Willis and Dick Hebdige. In much the same way, youth (but not children) make an appearance in Celia Lury's (1996) discussion of resistant subcultures and the possibilities these pose for new demarcations of time and for transforming popular culture into a common culture (1996: 192–225).

Similar points could be made about a number of significant works that have been important to the rise of contemporary consumer culture theory (e.g. Csikzentmihayli and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; McCracken, 1988; Baudrillard, 1990[1970]; Featherstone, 1991; Falk and Campbell, 1997; Bauman, 1998; Zukin, 2004; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Lacking explicit recognition and a purposeful, studied inclusion of children and childhood, attention is largely directed to a sometimes diverse, but temporally static, adult world in which status display, pleasure seeking and meaning making take place by and for adults, and for their own personal edification. The processes and contexts through which

these practices – as practices and not as assumed developmental inevitabilities – continue or change from cohort to cohort and generation to generation are left largely unconsidered, and certainly untheorized, because there is scant acknowledgement of birth, growth and death. Because children and childhood are absent, there is no sense of a ‘generational order’ (Alanen, 2001) thereby short-circuiting consideration of the arc of the lifecycle and leaving us with caricatures of social process and practices. Without children and childhood, we are thus left deficient in our ability to investigate the place of material goods and commercial activity in social lives, broadly construed.

### **STRUCTURED INVISIBILITY, THE ECONOMIC ADULT AND THE EMPOWERED/EXPLOITED CHILD**

The absence or near absence of ‘the child’ in general theories of consumer society signifies something beyond simple conceptual myopia. Corrective action in this matter will not consist of simply appending children to extant perspectives and approaches, of filling an omission. Excluding consideration of children and childhood from the conceptualization of the genesis, make-up and trajectory of consumption and consumer culture has effectively rendered them invisible, even in the few cases where they are mentioned. Children and childhood in the works discussed above come to the forefront (when they do) only to support already configured ideas and theoretical positions, not to inform them.

The invisibility of the child consumer stems from an assumption, operative in the theories and concepts discussed above, that it is adults who primarily, if not exclusively, engage in economic activity of any consequence – including consumer activity (Qvortrup, 1994; Zelizer, 2002). The working model of the social actor – of ‘the consumer’ – which animates the schemes and conceptualizations of consumption is decidedly adult and undoubtedly male. The ‘child’ does not appear as a social actor who enters the world, engages in meaning-making activities and who has and expresses desire for things (Prout and James, 1990; Jenks, 1996; James et al., 1998). The labor and experiences of women and mothers, as well, did not figure in any discernibly important way in the construction of notions about consumer society, despite scholarship and everyday experience that demonstrate that women/mothers serve as keys to consumer life, presently and historically (Bowlby, 1985; Ewen, 1985; Seiter, 1993; Costa, 1994; Cook, 1995; Pleck, 2000; Scanlon, 2000).

A likely source for the presumption of an adult male as the nodal social actor resides in a kindred but somewhat distinct realm of scholarship,

neoclassical economics, which is well-known for positing the male as the ideal typification of its economic actor. Not usually indicated is how this model of the economic actor is also assumed to be an adult. I believe this model migrated, unintentionally, unwittingly and in a piecemeal fashion, over to consumption theory (most often concerned with cultural approaches to consumption) because the figure of the (adult) male represents a deep analytic heritage for theorizing about economic and commercial matters generally (England, 1993; Carrier, 1997; Slater and Tonkiss, 2001; England and Folbre, 2005). It exerts subtle yet decisive influence by virtue of its foundational place in economic thinking, irrespective of the difference between 'economic' and 'cultural' approaches to consumption. Anytime 'the consumer' is invoked in the generic, there is never confusion that one is assuming an adult actor.

The weight and conceptual momentum of the assumption of the adult, usually male, actor does not simply disappear without effort, even for those who are cognizant of its ongoing hegemony. Don Slater (1997: 54–9), for instance, acknowledged his difficulty in integrating women's experiences and gender issues into his book-length discussion of extant theories of and approaches to consumer culture and modernity. These, as he says, 'get structured out of the field' (1997: 57). Indeed, a decade later there exist general texts on consumer culture that neatly segregate discussion of women from the main body of the text, thereby reproducing what now appears to be a characteristic myopia of the field. Women's place and experience remain exceptions, appendages to the larger conceptual project, as add-ons or as marked subjects, in some manner differentiated from the core conceptualizations of the subject area (e.g. see Oakley, 1993; Costa, 1994; Scanlon, 2000).

Children, as well, have been 'structured out' of the conceptualization of consumer society and culture generally, despite substantial and growing research and writing that directly addresses children/childhood and consumption. Social and culturally oriented scholars have studied, among other things: how children have been participants in modern consumer culture, and generative of its growth, since the early twentieth century in the USA (Seiter, 1993; Cross, 1997; Cook, 2004a; Jacobson, 2004); how commercial industries target children as consumers and use social and psychological research to capture a share of the family pocketbook (Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004); how children both use media and are subject to its influences (Kline, 1993, 2006; Kinder, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Livingstone, 2002; Marsh, 2005; Sammond, 2005; Allison, 2006); how children actively engage in consumer activity (Chin, 2001; Zelizer, 2002); and how

globalizing consumption and media contribute to globalizing childhood (Langer, 2004; Tobin, 2004; Peterson, 2005; Allison, 2006).

In these works, the 'child' to be sure is no longer 'missing' in the sense of not being recognized and investigated. The issue here rather is that – with few exceptions to be discussed later – scholars of children and consumer culture have not attempted to put their work in conversation with extant notions and theories of consumption generally. These works consequently do not readily lend themselves to offering critiques of the underlying presumptions and models that have come to stand for 'consumption theory.'

The ongoing difficulty of incorporating the 'child' and childhood as non-exceptional and integral to conceptualizations of consumer life begins, perhaps unsurprisingly, with the assumed or deployed model of the social actor and accompanying notions of economic action. Children pose analytic, ontological and epistemological problems to the theorizing of social action – most any kind of social action, economic or otherwise – precisely because their agency, being-in-the-world and ways of knowing are at issue. For economic theory – and, apparently for consumption theory as I have presented it – the 'child' is something of an impossible subject (Levison, 2000). It is an impossible subject because it does not and cannot stand still ontogenically. Children by nature and by definition transform in ways profoundly different from adults and so do their understandings of the world around them, including those dealing with goods and media, money and value (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; John, 1999), thereby confounding simple definitions of 'knowledge' and 'action.'

Change or development disrupts the bedrock figure of the knowing, calculating individual whose 'reasonableness' is assumed to extend from simply being an adult, the presumed endpoint of development. Children may 'calculate' their 'utility' in relation to a product in one way at two years old and in a different way at age seven or 10 (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; John, 1999). Variation at this fundamental level of being and knowing renders the traditional vocabulary of motives imputed to individuals untenable and makes crafting general theory onerous. Hence, in this light, it is not surprising that few have attempted to include children into general theories of *anything*; they simply do not 'fit' the formulations which had been crafted in their conceptual absence.

In what some call the 'new' childhood studies, researchers have studiously attended to children's subjectivities and agency, placing this issue at the center of a quickly emerging field of study (see Prout and James, 1990; Jenks, 1996; Christensen and Prout, 2005). With great energy and

ingenuity, scholars have convincingly forged a viable alternative to a strict, narrowly defined paradigm of linear child development by demonstrating how children make meaning in their social worlds. Children, in this view, are not incomplete vessels on their way to completeness at some future state of adulthood, but active social beings living in the here and now (see for instance Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Pufall and Unsworth, 2004; Boocock and Scott, 2005).

Curiously, comparatively few who explicitly take up this new paradigm of childhood studies also examine children's consumer lives (but see Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002; Marsh, 2005; Waerdahl, 2005; see also Martens et al., 2004). Most do not do so, in my view, because the new childhood studies has been founded on a politics of child liberation from adult structures by recognizing and encouraging their voice and agency in the world. This is the very same language used by marketers and advertisers, eager for moral cover to shield against charges of exploitation, who crowd under the banner of 'child empowerment' through goods (Schor, 2004, 180–4; Cook, 2007). These sorts of confluences confound notions of children's agency and power, and thus confound their use as political leverage, to the point of questioning their conceptual utility.

A dichotomy tends to divide those who see the child as active and 'empowered' (with linkages to the new childhood studies use of this term unmade or unclear) and those who see the child as a manipulable being subject to exploitation by advertising and marketing (see, for discussion, Seiter, 1999; Buckingham, 2000; Cook, 2004b, 2005). In sociology, anthropology, communication studies, consumer behavior and history, the lines drawn that facilitate this dichotomy tend also to indicate political positions. Those critical of capitalism and consumer culture lean toward the 'exploited' view (Kline, 1993; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997; Linn, 2004; Schor, 2004); those who see children as active and agentive beings present a generally agnostic view of the role and place of consumption and media in children's lives (Buckingham, 2000; Cross, 2004; Jacobson, 2004; Marsh, 2005; Martens et al., 2004). One significant exception here is Elizabeth Chin's (2001) ethnography of poor African-American girls, where she finds both empowerment and exploitation in their lives as consumers. The empowerment often came from the act of consuming; the exploitation from the context of race and poverty.

These constructs or definitions of the 'child' represent different solutions to the problems posed by the indeterminacy of children's being and agency. They serve as analytical props in the service of making children's consumption intelligible but without, as a rule, addressing themselves to

rethinking conceptions of consumption and consumer culture overall. The 'child,' even when it has been studied and made visible, has influenced little of consumption theory.

### BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD: MOTHERS, THE ANTICIPATED CHILD AND CO-CONSUMPTION

Children, childhood and the 'child' have been exceptional to and outside of social-cultural approaches to consumption, I believe, in part because the general thrust of thinking continues to be fixed at the level of the individual (economic) actor. The 'consumer' most often appears as an individual because consumption continues to be imagined largely as an individual undertaking by more or less competent, autonomous persons (i.e. adults), even by those who posit culture as an indispensable context to social action. Thus, constructs of the 'child consumer' have arisen that fit this extant paradigm and habit of thinking. That is, the exploited/empowered dichotomy of the child consumer reinforces a view and focus on what *children* know or don't know and what *children* do or can't do, as if they act alone.

There has been little or no recognition of women *as mothers* – and thus of accompanying caring obligations and ties – in general approaches to consumption and consumer culture (but see Seiter, 1993; Cook, 1995; Thompson, 1996; Clarke, 2004; Martens et al., 2004; Pugh, 2009 forthcoming). It is, of course, not coincidental but systemic that the invisibility and marginality of children go hand-in-hand with the invisibility and marginality of women, as Barrie Thorne (1987) has argued. Children and women often share similar social fates and have endured similar conceptual and philosophical treatments in social thought (Oakley, 1993; Alanen, 1994), with children understood by some as occupying a structural position akin to a minority group (Oldman, 1992). Recognizing and acknowledging 'the child' necessarily places the lives and experiences of mothers directly in the crux of the inquiry and, in so doing, changes the terms of the inquiry. To 'structure in' children to the field requires embracing women's, particularly mothers', perspectives and practices as constitutive of *how* consumption means, and not simply as additions to the presumption of *what* consumption means.

Children occupy the ambiguous social location that their indeterminate agency suggests, but they do not do so by themselves. Children cannot be thought of as isolated, individualized beings without going through a good deal of conceptual gymnastics and, importantly, neither can parents and other adults who attend to and care for children As dependent beings,

children rely on adults – usually, but not exclusively, on mothers – for most everything in their lives. It is largely mothers' work that provides for them – materially, socially and emotionally. Much caring work gets accomplished through the marketplace in the purchasing, preparing, gifting and provisioning of goods and services (see England and Folbre, 2005; Hochschild, 2003, 2005) often, as in the case of young children, without their knowledge, request or assent.

Contemporary children of wealthy nations, in this sense, enter the world already pre-figured as consumers – not as shoppers of course – who are already embedded in webs of commercial-material relations and envisioned as recipients and users of products at the outset of, and even prior to, their earthly existence proper. Mothers, fathers, partners, relatives and friends anticipate children in their own ways, ahead of any moment of an actual birth, often using commercial products to help visualize and make material the not-yet existing person. Giving gifts to the not-yet born often occurs during the ritual of the baby shower, as well as informally by prospective aunts, grandmothers and friends of the mother-to-be (Clarke, 2004). Parents regularly name the child before birth or adoption, and some put significant time, thought and money into decorating a child's room before its arrival (Clarke, 2004; see also Layne, 2000 on the role of goods in lost pregnancies). Consumption and consumer goods thereby become part of a person's existence well before they gain the ability to comprehend the value of money or the notion of a purchase – i.e., before they can behave as a purchaser.

When advertisers, marketers, designers and retailers imagine children as consumers they also place great effort into knowing the worlds of mothers and expectant mothers (Bailey and Ulman, 2005; Coffey et al., 2006). First-time, prospective mothers are often surprised, shocked and many are initially non-plussed when they begin to receive marketing materials from companies that sell all kinds of products – from life insurance to 'diaper genies'. Their reaction is not always focused on the specific products being promoted but on the mechanisms put in place by commercial enterprise that can identify them and foresee 'their' needs, in many cases before they have formulated their own questions and concerns (Bailey and Ulman, 2005).

The 'child consumer' thus is made well before it is born in contemporary times. Practices like these assist in prospectively defining a space ahead of any particular child, a space that it can inhabit culturally as well as physically. Recognizing and accounting for the active presence of the anticipated child – whether it occurs in the everyday lives of families or in

the planning sessions of marketing agencies – represents a key analytic move in the study of consumer culture because it disengages the notion of ‘consumer’ from its simple economic contexts and individualistic connotations. In this view, it is not useful to attempt to locate the individual consumer, in either the neoclassical economic sense or by way of the single cultural actor who ‘empowers’ her- or himself through shopping (e.g. Fiske, 1989).

Acknowledging how human beings are now implicated in and encompassed by regimes of commercial articulation from the very first imaginings of their existence is indispensable for any theory of consumption, consumer society or consumer culture. Without it, we are left with the analytic placeholder of ‘consumer socialization’ to account for the child consumer and subsequent adult consumer. Consumer socialization is a paradigm that carries the embedded assumption that there is more or less a single trajectory along which a child ‘becomes’ a consumer and ‘enters’ consumer life from a place or time ‘outside’ of it (Ward, 1974; Gunter and Furnham, 1998; John, 1999), and that there is a known endpoint to the development of the consumer – usually phrased in terms of implied adult ‘competence’. The consumer socialization perspective is, at base, teleological in its epistemology in the sense that it posits children as incomplete, less-than-knowledgeable persons whose movement is toward an assumed or desired state of being and knowing – i.e., a particular version of adulthood (Prout and James, 1990; Christensen and Prout, 2005).

The questions posed by the perspective here advocated do not concern themselves with when children may or may not become ‘good’ or ‘competent’ consumers – although I do not discount outright the importance of this issue. Clearly, important markers regarding the timing of children’s emergent understandings of advertisements, promotional intent, media, monetary value and the social value of goods are not to be ignored (Reece and Kinnear, 1986; Martin, 1997). These, however, must be situated within the larger trajectories of ontogenic movement and in social contexts of parenthood and peer-hood so as to avoid falling into the ‘competent-consumer-to-be’ conception or that of the individualized consumer. Stephen Kline (2006) wisely points out that life socialization and media-consumer socialization are now, in large part, one in the same in the sense that they no longer can be completely disentangled or considered apart from one another.

Approached from this angle, the child and the mother or caretaker can in no simple way be considered independent economic actors, yet they are ensconced in economic activity and consumer goods and meanings.

Purchasing, furthermore, often takes place for, in the name of, or with someone in mind other than the shopper. This everyday occurrence is acknowledged only sporadically in consumption theory and research (e.g. Miller, 1998; Chin, 2001), but is acknowledged in – of all places – economic theory. Gary Becker, the recognized proponent of an economic approach to social life, concedes that ‘altruism’ is at work within families in the form of modified utility calculations (1991: 277–306) where parents (here, usually male wage earners, see England, 2003) take into account and sacrifice for their children to increase the marginal utility of the entire family unit. Here, even economic theory shies away from the notion of the isolated actor – the ‘separative self’ (England, 1993) – when children are at issue, implying that social ties, affective relations and the mutuality of obligations do not disappear when ‘economic’ pursuits, including consumption, are at issue.

Scholars who have paid attention to and incorporated children and families into their thinking have arrived at a similar conceptual place. Shopping, for Marjorie DeVault, is part and parcel of the caring work a woman does when she is ‘producing the family’ as it ‘supports the production of meaningful patterns of household life by negotiating connections between household and market’ (1991: 59). The thoughtful consideration of tastes and preferences that go into a meal often take place in the food aisle of the grocery store (see Philips, 2008). The commercial marketplace, especially the grocery store, is a structured site where shoppers can carry out their own intentions and, for women in charge of households, those intentions often involve the consideration of and care for others, what Thompson (1996) calls the ‘relational self’ of caring.

There are parallel and complementary findings from other ethnographic work on consumption. Daniel Miller (1998) suggests a similar dynamic whereby the household shopping that women often do is embedded in rituals of love, sacrifice and devotion for family members. Many do not automatically purchase requested food items, but will buy instead things they believe will benefit the husband/partner or children (1998: 15–36). In the context of their labor, many shoppers will ‘treat’ themselves to something that they consider an extravagance that is beyond the realm of necessity (1998: 40–49), thereby enfolded a personally pleasurable act within a caring one. Chin’s (2001) study, mentioned earlier, reveals how goods and acts of consumption can serve as vehicles for social adhesiveness. When she gave each child \$20 to spend on what they wanted – an amount of money which represents something of a windfall (Pugh, 2004) – the strongest tendency of the children was to purchase something

specifically for their mothers or grandmothers and/or something that could be shared among friends and family. Indeed, children's 'identities', social position and 'dignity' (Pugh, 2009 forthcoming) vis-à-vis peers often relate to their ability to display and know about particular consumer goods, the possession of which is dependent on parental ability to pay and disposition to consume (see also Power, 2005).

By attending to children and by including them directly and unexceptionally into the mix of thinking about consumption, one comes away with a sense that much of consumption occurs as co-consumption and shopping as co-shopping. It is co-shopping not in the sense of necessarily being accompanied by children to the store physically – although children often do so (Philips, 2008; Williams, 2005) – but in the sense that significant others maintain a kind of presence in the practices of looking, desiring, considering and reflecting upon purchases. This kind of shopping/consuming and subsequent gifting, as Gary Cross (2004) points out, can give pleasure to adults and children alike.

In the main, except for those mentioned above, the notion of co-consumption has had little or no place in conceptualizations of consumption and consumer culture, or at least, has not taken hold to inform the overall picture. Co-consumption does not mean that personal indulgence, vanity and status seeking are magically removed from the human condition once children and childhood are taken into account. Far from it. The personal, hedonistic pursuit of the 'perfect pair of leather pants' (Zukin, 2004: 89–112) will surely continue. It is to say that these qualities do not represent the full spectrum of motivation, attention and action when it comes to consumption and are, as often as not, marginal or minority concerns of everyday living when compared to daily effort put into thinking about, caring for and reacting to children and their desires.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A good deal of the landscape of consumption theory takes on a different shape when children are recognized as social subjects and social objects in the world – as subjects who have knowledge of and desire for consumer goods and as objects of adult affection, caring and concern – and who are implicated in that world from the outset of conception and conceptualization. For one, it calls into question not only the notion of the individual consumer, but also the ideas of the individuality of desire, identity and lifestyle. In much research and writing about consumption, desire and identity are understood as exceedingly personal practices undertaken for cultural reasons, but which are ultimately locatable by way of identifiable

individuals (see, for instance, Miles, 1998; Tomlinson, 1990). This thinking, as we have seen, is at odds with how human beings enter and become part of commercial life and the world of goods in contemporary consumer capitalism.

I have endeavored to demonstrate how the ghostly figure of economic man continues to shape, in a quite stealthy way, thinking about the nature and contours of consumption. I argue that childhood, as a ubiquitous social fact and social institution, precedes any individual child and that commercial interests and parental/caretaker considerations figure into the imagining of the child prior to birth and to biographical social existence. Space does not allow an elaboration of how children and childhood interweave across virtually all areas of social life – i.e. in the make-up of neighborhoods and communities, in the planning, anticipating or changing of careers or life course directions, in law and cultural institutions – such that the points made here extend beyond ‘family life’ narrowly conceived.

The difficult point, I believe, for many of us to confront is that, in contemporary wealthy, media-saturated societies, no one ‘chooses’ to be a consumer in large part because it is impossible not to be one, as we are born into regimes of consumption. We can reject the idea that consumption is definitive of the self and of important relations; we can struggle with what ‘kind’ of consumer we might be or become; but to not consume at all and not participate in that world is a virtual impossibility. Hence, it is important for scholars to be cognizant of the often unexamined assumption that posits children as somehow outside the realm of economic life who are then brought into it either by caring adults, like parents or teachers, or dragged in by media and marketers. That line which divides ‘in’ from ‘out’ fades every day as structures of capital help structure the imagining of the worlds into which a child enters well before its post-partum existence.

Once one entertains this fundamental but always disturbing insight, then the commercial landscape takes on new contours and hues regarding the boundaries of ‘consumption’ as well as the singular integrity of ‘the consumer.’ As well, the perspective put forward here, by expanding the trajectory of consumption into the earliest and most primary aspects of existence – into the very contemplation of a life – we are confronted with the consequence that consumption involves the person in a lifelong activity with ontological ramifications (cf. Hockey and James, 1993). It is, of course, not just childhood that is at issue when one acknowledges the child consumer, but the commodification of the life course itself – of virtually all aspects of living – as well as the very nature and extent of

'consumption' vis-à-vis social lives. When spying children's consumption, we are spying how the 'generational order' (Alanen, 2001) or a 'generational ordering' (Christensen and Prout, 2005) becomes articulated in relation to commercial interests, practices and processes.

In making these statements and larger argument, I do not intend to suggest anything approaching a closed system of thought. Indeed, I have touched upon only a few, but I believe crucial, social arenas and contexts where 'consumption' can be said to have a significant presence. Many others are relevant. I have sought, rather, to make a strong point regarding the necessity of opening up thinking about consumption beyond the models and modes inherited from economics proper that many have, in key ways, unreflexively accepted and deployed. I offer the idea that the sincere effort directed at getting to 'know' children and childhood in all their manifestations and contexts will serve scholarship well as being a guidepost on the way out of this analytic cul-de-sac.

Once children's and women's centrality to consumption and economic life are grasped as profound, ongoing social truths, the entire landscape of social and cultural consumption theory transforms. The center of attention shifts away from the construction (and assumption) of the adult (male) as the ideal social actor, but not simply to be replaced with that of the generic woman or the generic child in a straightforward, one-for-one fashion. Decentering adults, males and the adult male, rather, means reordering conceptions of social life where children, hence mothers and women generally, would be placed at the nexus of consideration – not as individuals or as discrete types but as interacting beings embedded in social ties. The boundaries and trajectories of 'consumption' themselves thus transform because the operative focus no longer concerns a model of a single social actor, but multiple understandings of different subjects, subject positions and contexts that are variously oriented to one another. The focus moves away from individuals exclusively to include relationships, obligations and reciprocity.

Simply appending children and women onto the existing analytic scaffolding does not change the basic structure of the scaffolding. Consumption theory – if it is to serve us – must be reordered and rethought such that the lives and experiences of children, mothers and women generally (and childhood, motherhood and womanhood) are encoded like DNA into conceptualizations of commercial life.

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## Notes

1. Beginning in 2004, an international group of scholars has held a biannual conference on Child and Teen Consumption, perhaps the first of its kind. There is, in addition, a entire journal in the UK devoted to children's consumption, *Young Consumers*, a number of special issues of academic journals devoted children's consumer culture (*Journal of Consumer Culture* 4(2), 2004; *Childhood* 12(2) 2005; *Journal of American Culture* 1, 2007 ) and several edited books focusing more specifically on children's media and its relation to consumption (Hendershot, 2004; Tobin, 2004).
2. In subsequent clarifications of his thesis, the issue of children or childhood never arises, either in critiques of him or in Campbell's rejoinders (Campbell, 1995, 1996, 1999, 2003; Holbrook, 1996; Boden and Williams, 2002). See Lears's (1981) discussion of 19th-century notions of the 'natural child' and its consequences.
3. Martens et al. (2004) attempt to rehabilitate Bourdieu by suggesting that the notions of habitus and cultural capital may be applied to studies of how children consume. Their emphasis, nevertheless, is on fitting children into Bourdieu's conception. They do not seek to consider that Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital and habitus might be recast *in light of* the insights made possible when children and childhood – and thus the full spectrum of the lifecycle – are included as part of human social action from the outset.

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