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Thinking about Consumption in a Recession

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Other members of this research network are undoubtedly getting the sort of questions I am from journalists, students and friends: does consumption matter anymore, in this, the era of what Time magazine has called the New Frugality? Aren't people saving more, eschewing excess, moving in together, turning to thrift? Is the recession doing what years of simple-living jeremiads, as Gary Cross (2000) dubbed them, have been unable to? Fundamentally, is the impact of this economic dislocation powerful enough to shift spending patterns, priorities, and the meaning consumers make from buying and owning?

I don't think we can turn aside these questions solely because they are too glib, ahistorical or simplistic. I also don't think the answers are totally clear; the data are still not yet in about how consumers are responding to the global downturn. While retail sales overall are down significantly, they are not down uniformly, bearing out what scholars in this research network already know, that cultural meanings infuse economic behavior, transforming the straightforward ("we have to cut back") into an uneven topography of desires, obligations and needs.

I looked at how financial constraints shape consumer culture among low-income children as part of the research for my new book, *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture* (University of California Press). The book is based on three years of ethnography in Oakland, California, where I observed elementary school children and interviewed parents in three communities, low-income and affluent. I came to view children's social worlds as "economies of dignity," in which children's daily conversations featured commodified goods and experiences, seemingly idle chatter that nonetheless worked as a sort of arbiter of belonging, of visibility, of connection.

And when they did not own the items, or have the experiences their peers discussed? Across class, children developed a range of strategies to handle those moments when they did not have what it took to participate, as when one little boy worked so hard to memorize the GameBoy lore in a gaming magazine that it actually shredded from over-use. The intensity of children's feelings about belonging served to transform what might have been mild consumer desires into urgent consumer emergencies they then brought home. And when parents – even those dealing with economic strain – confronted their children's need to belong, most made it a top priority, in some cases above rent, creditors, or even food (Pugh 2004). Because low-income parents picked and chose those few items with the most social cachet for their dollars, I came to call their strategy one of "symbolic indulgence."

Underlying children's desires – and parents' rapid-fire responses – were profound fears of being different from others, fears that corporate marketing exploited and amplified (Schor 2004). Yet Bourdieuan notions of cultural capital and habitus did not easily predict the distinctions between parents and children in their tastes, goals and fears. Parents surely had class-ridden tastes, with the affluent among them telling me they

would draw the line at a “mullet” haircut, for example, or that they did not like the “big, loud, crappy, bullshit toys that break immediately.” But without ignoring the class dimensions of some children’s toys, for example in American Girl dolls, most children emphasized other dimensions of difference in their daily conversations; they sought to look older (but not too old), aware (of popular culture), and often, actively cared for (Seiter 1993, Cook 2004, Cross 2004). These were the parameters of same-ness that affluent and low-income children sought to establish in their economies of dignity. Their omnivorous consumer culture established connections among each other, in a situation when belonging was a priority, and a daily accomplishment (Lizardo 2006, Goffman 1967).

Randall Collins’ work on interaction ritual chains (2004) argues that people in small groups whose members rarely change and who see each other repeatedly are more likely to generate strong ties and strong consensus of what matters and what does not. I would add that this arrangement also make difference a riskier proposition. The organization of children’s daily lives – with more hours spent in the company of same-age peers in after-school settings, day care, preschools, camps, and the like – contributes to the power of commodified goods and experiences to signify belonging and connection. But in my research, I found that children’s peer cultures did respond to concerted efforts by schools to teach tolerance, to handle conflict, to embrace diversity – issues that are powerfully, integrally related to children’s economies of dignity and thus to consumption.

What are the implications of this work for our understandings of consumer culture in a recession? I argue that consumer culture forms part of the means of connection for children, and that the commodification of childhood rides on the back of their fears of difference. If parents are indeed cutting back in this downturn, they are most likely resorting for now to a symbolic indulgence strategy such as I found among my low-income respondents. But without addressing the fears of difference deeply held by children and their parents, the era of consumerism will surely return, if it ever left.

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