Book Review/Compte rendu

Allison Pugh, *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009, 320 pp. $US 21.95 paper (978-0-520-25844-0), $US 55.00 hardcover (978-0-520-25843-3)

When you have kids, you become painfully aware of the ridiculous volunteerism of your previous views on child-rearing. Assumptions of control (e.g., "can't they keep their kids quiet?"), are replaced with an acute understanding of how children are autonomous beings with their own culture, needs, and powerful desires. You may *wish* your child preferred genderless wooden toys with simple modernist designs, but you instead receive requests for plastic action-figures, senseless (and expensive) collectible cards, pricey gaming systems, and highly gendered dolls. Simply put, kids want what their friends have.

Until now, the primary sociological research examining children's consumer desires was work focused on corporate marketing. While the unrelenting influx of child-related commodities is a topic with essential research precedents (e.g., Juliet Schor's *Born to Buy*; Daniel Cook's *The Commodification of Childhood*), Allison Pugh's book starts from the premise that supply is only half of the equation — the other half being children's desire for consumption. Based on three years of fieldwork with kids in the Oakland area, Pugh's understanding of the social world of children sheds light on how children's desire for consumer commodities is part of a deeply held need to *belong*. Pugh calls this the "economy of dignity," and it forms the major argument of this well-written and captivating book. Inspired by Arlie Hochschild's analysis of the "economy of gratitude" amongst spouses, Pugh describes an economy of dignity where children "collect or confer dignity among themselves, according to their (shifting) consensus about what sort of objects or experiences are supposed to count for it" (p. 7). While Pugh is clearly sympathetic to children's desire to belong, she critiques a "culture of spending that redefines care and belonging as mediated through the market" and which is intolerant of difference: "those who want to opt out find it difficult to do so" (p. 25).

Pugh's ethnography of childhood consumer culture focused on three school sites: a low-income after-school program, an affluent public school, and an affluent private school. Together, these sites provide a

fascinating look at how consumer culture both transcends social class, and exemplifies the sharp divide shaping the life chances of children in the United States. What unites kids from widely divergent class backgrounds is a desire for key commodities like Game Boys, fashionable clothes, and collectible cards like Pokémon, as well as a common parental desire that their kids have enough to fit in and attain social belonging. In Pugh's terms, parents are not simply permissive, materialistic dupes, but consume because they are receptive to children's "economy of dignity." Relating the concept of "dignity" to a child's desire for a Playstation may seem like a semantic stretch (especially in a global context where a shameful number of children are hungry and malnourished) but Pugh's point is one long-recognized by consumption scholars and poverty activists: consumption standards are subjectively experienced as relative, not absolute. Pugh cites Adam Smith on this point, who long ago recognized that "necessities" are those understood to be "indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order to do without" (p. 13). (A personal anecdote to support this point: When we resisted buying our 4 year old son Pokémon cards, a daycare worker gave him some of her son's extra cards, feeling sorry for him as the only kid who didn't have any.)

While children across divergent race and class backgrounds may want a lot of the same stuff, their relationship to consumer culture is highly structured by their parents' access to income and cultural capital. Pugh presents a critical class analysis that helps sociologists better understand how consumer culture both reflects and shapes structural inequality. If care is equated with consumption, and commodities with belonging, then low-income children are disadvantaged not only by poor housing and sub-standard educational opportunities, but also by their affect — in particular, the extent to which they feel cared for and included in their peer culture.

While consumer culture creates common desires across classes, Pugh's research reveals important class differences. For example, upper income parents are conscious of demonstrating restraint in the face of consumer demands, a feature Pugh terms "symbolic deprivation" when parents signal their ambivalence and restraint in the face of consumer culture. In her interviews with affluent parents, Pugh discovered that most parents "say that they do not buy much for their children," despite the widespread prevalence of gaming systems, $100 American Girl dolls, $500 birthday parties, and expensive hobbies like horseback riding. In these affluent households, rules (e.g., limiting TV and gaming) and allowances were techniques used to gain a sense of consumer

restraint and socialize children's control, even though high consumption patterns prevailed.

In low-income families, Pugh documented different patterns of engagement with consumer culture. For poor parents, the emphasis was not demonstrating restraint, but emphasizing that they were buying *enough*, and that they were not "in trouble." These parents scrimped and saved in a pattern Pugh terms "symbolic indulgence," which refers to providing the most important consumer items that would enable children's belonging in their peer culture — "the minimum necessary to hold his or her head up at school" (p. 124). In Pugh's words, low-income parents "viewed provisioning unequivocally as the sign of a good parent" (p. 122). Low-income consumer consumption, however, comes at a price, threatening the family's financial stability and ability to provide basic necessities. Pugh critiques the right-wing idea that low income parents are irrational spenders, and instead points to parents' strategies for restraining children's voluminous consumer demands, the extensive planning required to meet certain consumer obligations (e.g., buying a Halloween costume, or buying Christmas gifts months in advance), and the symbolic importance of providing certain consumer items to communicate care and enable belonging for their children.

Pugh devotes most of her analysis to consumer durables, but one chapter also deals with "pathway consumption" — the opportunities that parents buy (or don't buy) to try and attain the best possible outcome for their child's future. While children from different class backgrounds may covet similar consumer goods, this chapter reveals the profound inequality that shapes children's lives not just in Oakland (a highly inequitable city, even by American standards), but the US more generally — particularly in a context where market solutions prevail and the state has significantly disinvested from educational opportunities. Pugh poignantly contrasts the private tutoring collectively organized for an affluent kindergarten class with a low income African-American single mother who scrapes together $1000 for a mail-order scholarship search service that she believes will take care of her daughter's college education. While affluent children's idiosyncrasies and special qualities are tended to and watered like rare flowers (e.g., through music lessons, private schools, tutoring), poor children lack access to this "luxury of difference": as Pugh writes, "cultivated uniqueness is generally not part of a low-income childhood" (p. 193).

While Pugh focuses on the need to belong as a key driver behind child-related consumption, the analysis is indifferent to the role of status-driven consumption — a feature that has marked the consumption landscape since Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899, and

continues to be documented today in Bourdieuian influenced scholarship. Pugh's own examples often suggest that kids (and their parents) buy things not just to fit in, but to stand out from, and be better than others. While Pugh's research usefully identifies belonging as the important driver underlying consumption, arguably children's consumer landscape is simultaneously shaped and driven by status — particularly in a socio-cultural context where competitiveness, winning and possessing "star-quality" are highly valued. Pugh appears aware of this drive – she uses the term "commodity arms race" — but the role of status is bracketed from the analysis, and this is a puzzling omission.

Pugh rejects the idea of children's consumption being understood through the concept of "cultural capital," observing that kids want "cheap, televised, and branded" things (p. 107) and not the uncommon fare of grow-up connoisseurs (e.g., preferring a Hanna Montana poster rather than a hand-crafted silkscreen print). While documenting kid's generic consumer preferences is an important research finding, it seems possible that kids possess their own form of cultural capital, albeit one that relates to mainstream culture — a culture that is not banal, or cliché from their youthful, un-jaded perspective, and that children gradually gain access to, depending on their parents' permissiveness and pocketbooks. Combining Pugh's findings with cultural sociology work on cultural capital, we can see possibilities for a developmental approach to consumption that recognizes that the desire for rare, distinct cultural objects is not a universal, upper-middle class trait, but is a feature that emerges gradually and sporadically, and only after children grow up and gain literacy in popular, mainstream culture.

A highly commendable feature of this book is Pugh's skillful writing and expressive approach to the research material. While engaging with academic debates on consumerism and culture, Pugh tells the stories of her research subjects using evocative language and poignant storytelling. We learn of a middle class boy unwrapping a Game Boy on his birthday, his mother stating, "I have to say I don't think that I have ever seen him so happy before or after that" (p. 2). In an analysis of resistance to consumer culture, we read about an immigrant African family who distance themselves from the rapaciousness of American consumer culture, and whose two children share only three toys between them, one of which is from a McDonald's Happy Meal. These stories aren't meant to simply shock us, or to pull on our heartstrings, but to powerfully illustrate sociological points on topics of race, class, and consumer culture. For me, this meant that reading this book didn't feel like "work," and I felt inspired by Pugh's example, which demonstrates how good writing, strong narratives, and the intimate details of family life are not diversions from

"real" or serious scholarship, but an important way that sociological truths are discovered and communicated.

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