

**From “Compensation” to
“Childhood Wonder”: Why Parents Buy**

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Abstract

This paper considers how American parents consume on behalf of their children, and their reasons for doing so, in the hopes of helping to untangle the work/family knot at the center. My research involves interviews and fieldwork with a white, largely middle-class sample of married and single mothers of 8-year-old children and is part of a larger study of what I call “child-rearing consumption” in general. In this paper, I outline a working typology of why parents consume and then delve more deeply into two of the most important aspects: consumption as compensation and as a conduit to childhood wonder.

The burgeoning field of work/family studies is taken up mostly with research on satisfaction, conflict, and balance among people straddling their work and family lives. Important studies have looked at how workplaces can make a difference, kinds of jobs, government policies, and schools. But consumption is surely an important part of work/family conflict, not least because most people work so many hours in order to keep up their “preferred standard of living” (Schor 1992). In short, the moving target that is the preferred standard of living, the truism that most people spend a little more than they make even as their income increases, the spending engine that drives greater and greater work hours, these notions are what make consumption worth studying from a work/family perspective.

Addressing consumption makes some social scientists uncomfortable because it lurks in the realm of individual blame, rather than social causes. Focusing on spending implies – for some people – that if only a person were wiser with his or her money, he or she wouldn’t have this problem, be it long work hours, childcare hours, or second shift disputes. Even the social critiques that emerge out of consumption – principally aimed at controlling advertising and marketing ploys – make us look like dupes who need help reining in desires craftily manufactured by others. The lingering question of many consumption studies seems to be: Why can’t we all choose to live more simply?¹

Nonetheless, consumption is too important a component of the work/family calculus to ignore for fear of evoking individual choice. In brief, the argument justifying the study of consumption from a work/family perspective is as follows: Work/family issues are grounded in time and space, in the compartmentalization of both into separate spheres for “work” and “family” (a historical event that some date to the early 19th century), and the commensurate invention of time scarcity, when nonwork activities were relegated to a certain portion of the day. The critical component sustaining this arrangement was the concept of need. Early industrialists had a conundrum: how to convince workers to keep working, even after they had worked sufficiently to earn enough to satisfy their needs? As Slater (1997) argues, a major struggle for and within capitalism focused on getting people to want more so that they will continue working in order to buy more commodities. “The concept and practice of ‘insatiable

needs' is not only a historical achievement but a very real social and political battleground," Slater (1997:18) contends.

Although the transformation of American society into a culture of consumption might suggest that the battles are now over, those early tensions persist. The constant possibility that a worker could just decide he or she had earned enough and quit is, in fact, built into the wage-labor system that is the market economy. Other systems structure the ways in which work is experienced in the United States; in particular, weak unions, globalized capital, anemic welfare state provisions and a pro-business state combine to help produce the characteristic over-employed, underemployed bifurcation of the American economy. By extension, these systems also shape the experiences of family as the activity that occurs mostly in the interstices of non-work time. It is the varying "need" for consumption, however, that brings workers to the employer's door in the first place.

Care and Consumption

The commodification upon which a market economy rests requires that people buy because they have to, in order to be able to create their experiences, their lives, their identities, their very selves. That which transpires outside of market exchange is increasingly limited. Just because they have little choice, however, does not mean there is little differentiation in consumption. Individuals buy for survival, for comfort, for revenge – the range of meanings of consumption is as wide as that of human feeling. The distinctions are worth making, not necessarily for moral reasons in terms of which kind of purpose is "better," but rather to begin to understand the nature of the golden chains linking people to the work system. People may not have choice in whether or not to participate in the consumption that makes life possible, but they might be able to choose to what extent they participate. Toward this end, we need greater understanding of the factors pushing us in the direction of greater and greater consumption. We need to understand why people buy.

An important, and understudied, feature of consumption is that done in the name of care. For those who buy for children, consumption is part of caring adequately, involving the complex tasks of managing and meeting children's needs and desires. In consumer cultures such as the

United States, where the commodity frontier moves apace, spending is an act of making connections (Cheal 1987). Whom caregivers buy for, under what circumstances, what they consent to buy, what they are forced to buy, what they refuse to buy – these are all crystallizations of relationship, moments from which children and buyers make emotional meaning.

The unification of care and consumption is an uneasy one. Child-rearing, particularly mothering, in its idealized form takes place in the “haven” that is the sanctified private sphere and involves relations that some have hopefully portrayed as beyond the reach of the pecuniary values of the marketplace (Cook 1995; cf. Lasch 1977). Viviana Zelizer’s (2000) recent work on the furtive role of money in realms of intimacy — from child care to bodily care to marriage — highlights the idea that motherhood and childhood are somehow supposed to be removed from the profane for-profit world. The place of consumption within that sphere thus is an awkward one — hence, for example, vociferous middle-class concerns for youth “materialism” (Schor 1998). Appropriate child-rearing employs “attentive love” (Ruddick 1989) and is a “noisy, exhausting joyous business that uses up a chunk of one’s best energy and taps into prime time” (Hewlett 1991:122). It is not about buying.

Yet in a market society, no child-rearing occurs completely divorced from the market, and appropriate care necessarily involves some spending. Just how much spending is often a matter of comparison and negotiation (both explicit and implicit) between caregiver and child, in which they each refer to their social contexts, priorities, and orientations (all of which may differ substantially). Parents, and others who buy for children, are uniquely positioned at the intersection of care and consumption to provide a useful perspective on the changes wrought by the inroads of the market into nurturing practices. This project attends to the moving line of people’s own definitions of appropriate consumption in caregiving and focuses on the process of how they come to locate it.

The State Of Knowledge About Child-rearing Consumption: Emulation

The commercialization of American life, as measured by the range of commodities and services available for cash, has “unquestionably advanced during the 20th century” (Zelizer

1994: 2). Many commentators have noted women's roles as consumers in this expanding economy, but less remarked upon have been the deepening links of this spending with child-rearing. Most who have written about it cast it as motivated by "emulation," or keeping up with the Joneses.

As Juliet Schor (1998:85) points out, it is through child-rearing that people most keenly feel the pressure to "overspend," to emulate neighbors and peers: "The one place where keeping-up behavior is paramount and conscious is where kids are concerned." One of her informants, Louise Mattson, a stay-at-home mother, avowed: "It doesn't bother me if other kids are wearing Osh-Kosh and my kid is wearing K-Mart," although in the same breath she let Schor know her child did not wear K-Mart because of her garage sale finds (p. 85). Schor observes that children can be the impetus for overspending, as well as the conduit for consumer information.

Emulation can also have a more urgent cast, as in Making Ends Meet, Edin and Lein's (1997) investigation into how welfare-reliant and low-wage working single mothers survive. Their subjects talked about why they bought expensive name-brand sneakers for their children, particularly if they had teenaged boys. "My boy, he sees these kids that sell drugs. They can afford to buy these (sneakers) and he can't. So I have my little side-job and (I buy them for him). You've got to do it to keep them away from drugs, from the streets," one mother said. The children felt they could not maintain their self-respect or that of their peers if they wore shoes from K-Mart, the mothers reported. One recounted how she ate only one meal a day for a month in order to be able to buy her son a pair of \$50 sneakers (Edin and Lein 1997:26). Mothers took these steps as a nod toward what Sennet and Cobb (1973) referred to as the "personal restoration" of consumption, using possessions to reach for personal dignity in a hardscrabble existence. "You gotta do what you gotta do to make your kid feel normal," said one mother (Edin and Lein 1997:30).

Yet emulation, even the symbolic emulation of the desperately poor choosing just one item with which to "keep up," does not explain the whole of child-rearing consumption. In my research, parents evinced a variety of factors structuring their decisions to buy or not to buy for their children. Their consumption was as often a message directed within the family, a message about care and relationship, as it was an other-directed statement about status.

Caring Consumption – “Caring About” and More

Some scholars have considered the ways in which consumption is a relational act, one striving for connection (Miller 1998). The concept bringing some consumption scholars to this perspective has been, somewhat ironically, that of materialism, particularly the greater materialism found in children of divorce. Following Richins (1994), who noted how material possessions symbolically serve as ties to interpersonal relationships, Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton (1997) contend such symbolism helps children in disrupted households bridge the physical gap between themselves and an absent parent.

That particular possessions or acts can symbolize for their owners relationships with other people is only one form of relational consumption — and a particularly distanced, discursive form at that, one that care researchers might term “caring about.” Child-rearing consumption surely comprises such symbolic acts — as caregivers represent to themselves and others exactly who it is they are caring for, who is within and who is without their specific caring orbit. Yet is consumption implicated in other parts of care, such as that identified by the political theorist Joan Tronto (1993), including “taking care of” (taking responsibility for meeting needs) and “caregiving”? Is child-rearing consumption, then, a form of care, albeit one that comes laden with the display and identity work that researchers ascribe to consumption in other contexts?

Thompson (1996) described the professional women with children whom he interviewed as “caring consumers.” Viewing products as facilitators of their “juggling lifestyle,” the mothers valued goods and services that best allowed them to accommodate the needs of multiple others. This work spawns a number of intriguing questions: If caring consumption is that which allows us to accommodate others, then what kind of needs are granted primacy as their priority is evaluated? If buying is a caring act, then how do caregivers talk about limits to consumption — as regrettably or even painfully imposed by resource constraints, as fixed by moral boundaries, or as part of the caring process? Or are there no logical limits?

Methods

Using qualitative methods, I investigated these questions through interviews and fieldwork; this research is ongoing. I interviewed seven white, middle-class mothers, four of

them married, three of them divorced. All but two had two children, and all lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. About half worked part-time, some were full-time workers and others full-time stay-at-home mothers.

Interviews best elicit how people imagine and talk about daily meanings and experiences, but fieldwork observations can be an important means of gathering data to support or challenge self-reports and deepen analytic interpretations. In this project, I also accompany those who consume on behalf of children on a child-related shopping trip, thus bearing witness to how they consume amid considerations of relationship, need, desire, constraints, and competition – the social contexts of “caring consumption” (Chin 2001; Miller 1997). The fieldwork buttresses the interviewing data in important ways, by highlighting the emotional components of consumption in action and by rendering apparent priorities that may or may not emerge in conversation.

This research relies upon the grounded theory method, an interactive dance of observation, analysis, and reflection, punctuated by constant checking and rechecking one’s evolving story and conclusions with informants back in the field (Glaser and Strauss 1968). At least at the outset, child-rearing consumption is broadly defined as anything bought for the child or in order to care for the child. As described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), the process of data analysis involves first the identification of several “themes,” or observations about my informants’ behavior and beliefs. Then I gather instances of these themes to develop them into analytic memos, which subsequently guide my evaluations of those themes most pivotal.

The Drive To Connect, the Urge To Buy

I began my interviews in January 2002, and preliminary results among the middle-class subset I have interviewed so far suggest there are several ways in which consumption has come to stand for and also to occupy child-rearing energies. Although I outline them as distinct, in all likelihood, most caregivers find themselves buying in each of these modes of action at one time or another. One thread runs through them all: consumption as connection.

In general, child-rearing consumption appears to be mostly about establishing and maintaining connections between caregiver and child; very few instances appear to be about simple status display. These opportunities to consume and thus to connect happen most often

through family- or child-based rituals like birthdays, Christmas/Hanukah, and other events organized around the calendar. Although most spending appears driven by this need, there are different kinds of connection, and the urge to connect stems from different perspectives. I differentiate five types of consumption, and explore two in greater detail:

- ? *Provisioning*: The spread of marketization, in which more and more goods and services are bought and sold, has meant that, increasingly, daily sustenance is part of market activity.
- ? *Familymaking*: Caregivers' spending in part defines who the family is and is not, what counts as visible and invisible obligation, and what kind of relationships lie outside the family's circle. Caregivers also purchase goods and services that represent the family to the family, as when they secure entertainment: Do they buy televisions (one for the whole family to watch or several for more fragmented interests, and whose interests are being made visible here?), board games (At what level are they pitched – a child's age, and the adults participate as benevolent altruists? Or are they for adults, and the children struggle or look on?), or other options?
- ? *Replacement*: Caregivers who cannot be physically present and responsible where or when they think "child-rearing" should happen may call upon consumption to meet those needs. "Overworking" mothers — borrowing a term from Rivka Polatnik (2000) — in dual-earner or single-parent households may find their time so constrained that they spend money on people and goods that do what they cannot. (Greve as cited in Schor 1998)
- ? *Compensation*: Caregivers who deem their children deprived in some way may seek to make up for it, to meet their perceived needs through additional spending — for "Sunday shoes," for take-out food, for after-school tutors or lessons for a child in public school (White 1990).
- ? *Conduit to childhood wonder*: Some caregivers hold dear a concept of childhood as wondrous and consider appropriate caregiving as that which can deliver that wonder. These buyers are motivated to consume in order to evoke repeatedly a

child's joy and delight. The child's transition from wonder to expectation to cynicism can lead to a constant ratcheting up of how much will be enough to evoke awe.

Consumption as Compensation

Many of my informants spend money on their children in order to compensate for something, either something amiss in their own lives or something they perceive is amiss in their children's lives. Some appear to be compensating for wrongs of their own childhood, as one mother who said she could not remember one gift she had received when she was growing up. In contrast to such patently false economy, she said: "I know how to spend my money."

Another group appears to offer their consumption to compensate for some aspect of their children's lives. What exactly they feel is wrong with their children's lives varies as widely as their own circumstances. Jessica is a 43-year-old divorced Jewish manager who shares custody of her two kids, 12-year-old Emily and 8-year-old Julian. Her consumption is a form of compensation for her divorce that she offers to her daughter like a salve. As an example, she describes her manner of preparing their school lunches:

Jessica: I have a sense...my kids get pretty good lunches, apparently, on the unhealthy side. So, for example, my daughter's friend likes to poach her lunch because her mother never gives her cookies or never gives her a bag of chips. I kind of go for whatever they'll eat during the day, like I don't really worry too much about that. As long as they have something in their stomachs...My daughter had a, she had a depression a couple of years ago and she lost some weight and the doctor was concerned, so I kind of go just as long as she's eating, she's pretty skinny, and so...I just kind of want to make sure they're eating something during the day, so I always try to pack stuff they like. And I just made a decision a couple of years ago just to pack stuff they like....

Int: Can you tell me more about her depression?

Jessica: We think [her depression] is probably related to when her dad and I split up...She did go through a time, the doctor was worried, because she, just from one visit to the next she had actually lost some weight and gained some height, so she was a little worried, and so she saw a therapist, and came out of it...That's pretty much what it was about.

Int: Has this changed the way you care for her?

Jessica: Oh yeah, she's definitely sensitive, and I try to say yes as often as I can with her....I worry about her because she is so serious.

Jessica is clearly reluctant to impose limits on her daughter, even in the realm of consumption, because she doesn't want to be hard on her. She gives her food choices in her lunch that are on the permissive side of their social context – chips, cookies, even soda -- “just fix her something she'll like.” I think it is important to note that not all divorced parents feel this way, that I have a number of divorced parents in my sample who don't evince these sorts of pressures. In addition, it is clear divorce is also related to other trends in consumption. The phenomenon of the “Saturday Santa,” for example, in which noncustodial fathers use consumption as a sort of shorthand to convey love and connection in abbreviated circumstances of family, is documented in the literature.

Research has repeatedly shown that single mothers spend proportionately more on their children than married mothers; one such study found children's share moves from one-quarter to one-third of family spending (Gronau 1991). Even when income is held constant between two-parent and single-parent homes, single parents are found to buy more meals away from home, among other services (Zick, McCullough, and Smith 1996). And as in many cases, when their income plummets, and other kinds of spending adjust downward to their new financial situation, single mothers' child-rearing expenditures don't shrink in the same way (Lino 1996). The consumption balance alters in favor of the child as the child takes more responsibility for home and family maintenance, has more of a role in shopping and consumption decisions, and perhaps begins to value possessions as symbols for an absent parent (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 1997).

Evidence certainly suggests that caregivers in different social contexts use child-rearing consumption as compensation, and not simply divorced parents or those of limited financial means, as in Edin and Lein's (1997) study. Thompson's (1997:397-98) “caring consumers” explicitly linked their careers to the provision of goods for their children, as did one informant who declared: “A lot of things that I do for my children, [my parents] couldn't do for me with only Daddy working. Like gymnastics lessons and cub scouts and stuff like that, those were like luxuries we didn't have that I am happy I can give to my kids.” Another working mother noted

she buys more for her children to avoid conflict during quality time. “Rather than to make a confrontation, you sort of make up for it by giving them what they want.”

Guilt is clearly at work in compensation by consumption; the parent feels some sort of responsibility for whatever is “wrong.” In addition, the symbolism of consumer goods is powerful. The efficiency of consumption, of using things as symbols to convey relationship, is clearly part of its appeal not just to divorced dads, but also to all sorts of families, including dual-income families who are pressed for time. This process makes a commodity – a tradable thing – out of love because it calls upon other items to stand for it, to recall it, and to feed it. Still, that goods can symbolize feelings is convenient (not least for merchants) and may be one of the most important factors in their proliferation.

Consumption as the Conduit to Childhood Wonder

Driving the child-rearing consumption of some informants was the urge to evoke “the magic of childhood,” as one informant called it, or, following Gary Cross (2002), “childhood wonder.” Parents talked about kids responding to gifts with sheer delight mixed with awe, with “wow, it’s just what I’ve always wanted,” with unprecedented joy. “I have to say I don’t think I have ever seen him so happy before or after that,” said one mother after giving her son a long-yearned-for Gameboy.

Although not everyone attested to childhood wonder as a motivation for their buying, there is some evidence that it figured in many people’s child-rearing consumption at one point or another. It is not that parents haven’t given to thunderstruck children before; the ritualized awe of seeing the toys under the tree Christmas morning is but one example hearkening back at least 150 years. But buying to elicit childhood wonder stems from attitudes about children and families that appear to be gaining in prevalence and scope. Most important, such buying often has ironic consequences, poignant for all that they are unintended.

Childhood Wonder Defined. The phenomenon at issue here is more than that of giving kids merely what they like or what they’ve said they want; instead, giving to evoke childhood wonder is giving what children like, what they want, and, most important, what they don’t

expect. Children can fail to predict what their parents will give them if their parents convince them they would never buy the coveted object or if the children assume that on their own.

There are several ways to make a gift totally unexpected. Particular prizes might be considered too expensive, too grandiose, or too “old” or otherwise inappropriate for the child in question. They might offend parents’ stated preferences, for example, for playthings without overt violence or sexism (Cross 1997; Seiter 1993). For this reason, childhood wonder purchases are not, by and large, “educational” toys. Frequently, they are expensive, or if not, then they are bought in such quantities as to make them so. They are often things that some strains of social mores or expert opinion suggest parents *should not* get for their children (Pugh 2001).

Thus, parents or other buyers can struggle with the decision, evincing before and often afterwards some inner conflict about that which was bought. In some cases, particularly with older children, the degree of wonder on the part of the child receiving a gift is directly linked to the degree of hesitation and sometimes discord on the part of the giver or givers accompanying its purchase. In my research, parents sometimes talked about the longed-for gift with dread, as when they talked about “letting it into the house.” An essential fact about many childhood wonder gifts is that parents often “know better,” but they buy it anyway.

Such keen ambivalence begs the question: Why buy the childhood wonder gift at all? What is it about childhood wonder that is so powerful as to override parental misgivings about “spoiling” children, schooling them in sexism and violence, or exposing them to “older” influences than the parent would like? Classical sociological theory about consumption offers one view; psychoanalytic theory offers another. In what follows, I review what each of these has to contribute to understanding this brand of consumption. I conclude with a third way, in which I make use of family history and a sociology of emotions to venture a theoretical explanation of consumption in search of “childhood wonder.”

Classical sociological theory, following Veblen, suggests that consumption is about emulation, and as we have seen, many modern writers also follow this line of argument. (Veblen 1899/1994; but see Campbell 1987 for a cogent critique of emulation’s several meanings). In this vein, one’s reference groups – neighbors, friends, colleagues, mothers’ groups, and so forth – help to define just what is appropriate as a child’s gift. (Schor {1998} expanded this argument to

include as reference groups people with whom one might identify on television programs like *Friends*.) If the neighbors are giving their daughter a Barbie townhouse, it sets up a certain bar against which gifts to your daughter will be measured.

Emulative theory goes a long way toward explaining the stratification in gifts among socioeconomic classes; what works to elicit childhood wonder will vary according to the means of the buyer and the child, but also according to the child's social context. Emulation also helps us in deciphering the phenomenon of toy fads, such as the furor surrounding Cabbage Patch Dolls or Tickle-me-Elmo; it seems unlikely that such buying fads are the result of each parent being individually and simultaneously struck with the notion that these toys are the perfect gift for their youngster.

What emulation cannot provide is the "why" behind the childhood wonder purchase. This is not to say parents buy everything in a status vacuum. Undoubtedly, many child-rearing purchases are rife with status meanings, from clothes, to toys, to schooling. But purchases made to evoke childhood wonder appear to be less about status and more about the relationship between parent giver and child recipient, involving a message internal to the family dynamics, a message about desire, recognition and release.

Psychoanalytic theory makes internal family dynamics its *raison d'être*, and thus we might find there a possible explanation of the drive to elicit childhood wonder with gifts. Psychoanalytic writers delve into early childhood-family relations for the clues to lifelong perspectives and behavior. When coupled with insights from social science, psychoanalytic theory can help unravel such mysteries as women's predilection to mothering (Chodorow 1978) or the manner and depth to which we express grief (Obeyesekere 1981).

Psychoanalytic theory would suggest parents make childhood wonder purchases because of a narcissistic inability to resist satisfying their children's desires, once they know what they are. To give the perfect gift is first of all an act of acute "recognition" of the child's individuality and of exactly what it is that the child wants. As Benjamin (1988) writes, recognition is one of the critical components of intersubjective psychic health, in which we develop our selves in mutual interaction with others, starting with our primary relationships. Parents who know exactly for what their child yearns are dedicated to this dance of knowledge and discovery.

But, according to Benjamin, Freud, and others, this dance requires of parents a second step, after recognition, in which they establish boundaries for the child by limiting which of the child's desires are met. Benjamin (1988) terms this act "assertion" and argues that although it is frustrating for the child, only with such assertion do children understand where they end and the other begins and a true sense of self can begin to emerge. Nonetheless, assertion requires that parents be comfortable with their own failure to meet the child's wants.

The pivotal moment, called the rapprochement crisis, is when the toddler first asserts his or her will, when "the issue is no longer what the child needs but what he wants" (Benjamin 1988: 35). Recalling Freud's comment about "His Majesty the Baby," Benjamin notes that this crisis is when the parents' abandoned expectations of their own perfection return to the fore.

By identifying with her child's disillusionment, and by knowing that he will survive it, the parent is able to respond appropriately; in doing so she has to accept that she cannot make a perfect world for her child (where he can get everything he wants) – and this is a blow to her own narcissism. (Benjamin 1988:35)

When I asked one informant, Daisy, a married mother of two, whether she had ever regretted a purchase, she came up with "the Barbie car." "She wanted a Barbie remote car, so I got her a Barbie remote car," Daisy said. But, she added, "She didn't mean that; she meant the kind that you climb in." She described Christmas morning, when her daughter unwrapped the car:

I couldn't – she was so unthrilled, yeah, totally unthrilled. {Acting out the scene}: "Isn't that great???" "Uh-huh." It was like you could tell, she was so unthrilled. {Recalls reaction.} "I don't get it." {Laughs.} It took me a while to figure out why she didn't like that Barbie remote car. {Recalls scene.} "Isn't this what you were talking about?" "Well, no...." But she was only 2, so it took a long time to finally figure it out....

I think we were in Toys R Us and she goes – "That's the Barbie remote car I wanted." "Ohhhh....Boy, Santa really goofed, huh." {Laughs again.}

And I felt so guilty about missing that point, so that the next birthday when she was 3 I got her one, that she only used about seven times."

For Daisy, the moment when she realized that she had guessed wrong lay in her daughter's tepid reaction to the gift. The pain of that misrecognition was Daisy's to feel; her daughter didn't seem particularly wounded. Nonetheless, that pain was such that it had to be rectified at the next celebratory opportunity (her daughter's birthday months later), even though at that point the present had lost its meaningfulness as a conduit to childhood wonder – her daughter didn't really want it anymore.

Parents who buy for childhood wonder might actually be able to say no in most cases, and might not normally be the infamous “permissive parents,” as labeled by advice books and right-wing columnists. Nonetheless, according to psychoanalytic theory, childhood wonder gifts are when they give in to their own narcissism, when they cannot tolerate what “no” communicates to their child (i.e., their own failure to give satisfaction.) Psychoanalytic theory suggests parents give childhood wonder presents when they succumb, often against their better judgment, to their own needs to be the miracle bearer, the one who can do it all.

Psychoanalytic theory helps us to understand the internal motivations of certainly some of those who buy childhood wonder gifts. Yet, as is often the case with universal theories of inner life, it is difficult to explain social behavior – why many parents resort to childhood wonder gifts – with individual pathologies. I cannot argue sweepingly that American parents today are more narcissistic than in the past.² Missing here is a sense of time and place, engendering the questions: Why would parents experience the desire to say “yes” with gifts so acutely now? Are there parents who feel this more than others? What factors conspire to marry child-rearing and consumption in late 20th- and early 21st-century America?

The Convergence of History and Sociology on Childhood Wonder

According to family historians, the American family has been steadily losing its multiple functions since the Puritans of the 1600s (Demos 1970). Once the site of schooling, productive as well as reproductive work, health care and a host of other functions, families are now responsible solely for the emotional succor of their members. Child socialization, the most recent task to be siphoned off, for many now takes place in schools, day care centers, and other institutions (Coontz 1992; Dizard and Gadlin 1990). Yet emotions are inherently unstable, and

the fragility of family bonds dependent entirely on emotions has led to increasing divorce, the fraying of connections between parents and children, as well as between siblings, and the attenuation of intergenerational care responsibilities (Hochschild 1997).

If emotions signify family and family signifies emotions, then parents seeking to elicit such intense emotions – of awe commingled with love, of unprecedented joy – are engaged in family-making behavior. The history of American families suggests that parents who buy childhood wonder gifts are seeking to establish or maintain a strong emotional connection with their children, with their very definition of family at stake.

Theodore Caplow (1982), who analyzed Christmas gift giving in Middleton in 1979, noted that children under 18 received the vast majority of gifts exchanged. He concluded that Christmas gifts were a flag signaling an uncertain yet important relationship, and the great quantity given to children, particularly adolescents, was because their love was the most uncertain of all. Using Caplow's notion that gifts follow uncertainty, we can view childhood wonder gifts as messengers pleading for the certainty of the intense, reverential enchantment evinced when the gift giver got it exactly right.

In addition, the recognition of children's desires, the meeting of their needs and wants, are part of the job description of the modern-day mother. According to the ideology of intensive mothering, as described by Sharon Hays (1996:8), "Methods of appropriate child-rearing are construed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive." Hays documents how the separation of caring and working into distinct conceptual spheres, and the intensification of tasks in each sphere, has led to an untenable contradiction in which working mothers are unable to do both "well." (See also Williams 2000.)

Within the dictates of this cultural logic, the altruism of good mothers towards their children is unfettered by the competing demands of work time, by resource constraints, by considerations of self, indeed seemingly by any limits at all. Perhaps, for some, childhood wonder gifts stem not from narcissism, not from hopes for strong connections, but rather from this mandate to give, and give endlessly. If a cultural edict does not recognize limits to a mother's capacity for giving, then perhaps that culture undermines her capacity to say "no" and still be a good mother. In essence, the culture makes narcissists of us all when it makes

abandoning expectations of our own perfection too costly, when to do so means we are bad mothers.

But surely gift giving is not only about the giver. Children are part of the childhood wonder experience; after all, the parent comes to know what the child dreams of only by having the child indicate it in some way. Children experience the desire, then put it aside, only to see it embodied in the gift later. “Childing,” or the processes of being a child, involves participating in this handshake, this communication sent and received. The child is clearly a pivotal actor in childhood wonder gifts – indeed, if and when the child does not provide the requisite response, then the gift (and giver) is a failure.

Why Childhood Wonder Matters

The poignancy of the gift given to corral intense emotion, indeed of any gift, is in the hope embodied within, the hope that feelings about the gift will be projected also upon the giver. If a child feels wondrous delight about a gift, surely some of that feeling will bleed onto the buyer. Yet the central object of that first intensity is a thing, a product, the gift that had been longed for. At worst, parents risk making of their own love a fetishized commodity by enabling something to stand for it. At best, the projected intense feeling alights first on the object, then lands on the giver, already at some distance from its origin.

The strategy of the childhood wonder gift is also poignant in its primary unintended consequence: the ratcheting up of what causes “wonder” at all.³ Each gift a child receives adjusts his or her expectations about gifts, parental protestations that “this is a one-time exception” notwithstanding. Daisy, who had bought the Barbie car, describes a sense of gratification from her kids’ reaction when they receive a present from her, the total rush of their unalloyed joy, which later on gets leavened with something a little more knowing. “At a certain point, doing that when they are little babies, they just are grateful. And then after a few years, they start getting demanding or expect it and you go, “Uh, oh, maybe I’m not doing the right thing. Here I’m making them like bratty, and I better pull back.”

Colin Campbell (1987) has written of the disenchantment when a real object fails to live up to a fantasized one. The disenchantment, the cynicism of those accustomed to the

disappointment of things, feels like a sort of corruption to parents. As they get more and more, children are steeled against the intense joyful feeling and less able to conjure up the awestruck love for gift or giver. With exposure to childhood wonder gifts, then, children become inured to wonder.

Conclusion

Consumption as compensation and as delivering childhood wonder are just two of a number of frameworks I found motivating parents' child-rearing consumption strategies. Parents sought to forge connections with their children with consumer goods, bought and given in a certain spirit and with a certain message. Further research I plan with children and parents will help divine whether the message received is the message sent as we work toward constructing a sort of Rosetta Stone for the language of consumption between parents and children. At stake are the cultural meanings of care – its very comprehensibility to child and caregiver alike – as the market continues on its way to becoming the mediator of relationships between adults and the children they rear.

Notes

1. The word “choose” in this question leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many social scientists, who would prefer our analytic gaze to be on the level of social structures and the ways in which they order our lives (why aren’t there more part-time jobs available? What are the factors contributing to people’s ability to sustain two-job families?). Choice has something to do with the direction of our lives, but certainly to emphasize it too much is to elide powerful social forces that shape our decisions.

2. Of course, Christopher Lasch (1979:88) did just that in The Culture of Narcissism, in which he contends that “every age has its own peculiar forms of pathology, which express in exaggerated form its underlying character structure.” In Freud’s day, the hysteric amplified that era’s concern with “acquisitiveness, fanatical devotion to work, and a fierce repression of sexuality,” but contemporary therapists are increasingly met with narcissists (p. 103).

3. Benjamin (1988:35) wrote of the more dire costs of giving in to a child’s every desire. In that case, she observes: “The parent has ceased to function as an other who sets a boundary to the child’s will, and the child experiences this as abandonment; the parent co-opts all the child’s intentions by agreement, pushing him back into an illusory oneness where he has no agency of his own. The child will rebel against this oneness by insisting on having his way even more absolutely. The child who feels that others are extensions of himself must constantly fear the emptiness and loss of connection that result from his fearful power. Only he exists, the other is effaced, has nothing real to give him. The painful result of success in the battle for omnipotence is that to win is to win nothing: the result is negation, emptiness, isolation.”

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