



ARTICLE

Windfall Child Rearing

Low-income care and consumption

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Abstract. This article reports the findings of an investigation into how low-income families construct childhoods amid the growing marketization of services for children. Based on data from ethnographic work and interviews in low- and middle-income communities in Oakland, California, I found that income instability was as important as income scarcity in influencing how families consumed on behalf of children. For low-income families, the unpredictability of resources gave rise to a set of behaviors and outcomes that I term 'windfall child rearing'. I explore the origins of resource instability for these families and consider the impact of windfall child rearing on children's lives, including their worldviews, their behavior and their relationships with caregiving adults.

Key words

childhood • family • inequality • parenting • resources

INTRODUCTION

Consumption practices factor strongly in shaping children's daily lives, from the food that kids eat to the shows they watch to the things they desire. Consumption, Daniel Miller (1998) points out, is also part of what constitutes relationships between parents and children. In the USA, some \$215 billion are spent by, on or for children (McNeal, 1999). Yet families vary considerably in their ability to participate fully in consumer culture. How do income constraints configure family consumption practices? Amid the marketization of childhoods, how do low-income families construct a 'good enough' childhood (Cross, 2000; Winnicott, 1971)?

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I investigated these questions as part of an ongoing ethnography in Oakland, California. Based on interviews and fieldwork with mostly low- and middle-income families in this city, I found that *income instability* was as important as *income scarcity* in determining the ways in which families consumed on behalf of children. For low-income families, the unpredictability of resources gives rise to a set of behaviors and outcomes that I term 'windfall child rearing', with particular origins and implications for children's lives.

THE IMPACT OF RESOURCES ON CHILD-REARING CONSUMPTION

How do resources influence child-rearing consumption or the consumption that is undertaken on behalf of a child's nurture, needs and pleasure? How do families construct a 'good enough' childhood for their children in contexts of affluence and constraint? Modifying a term from the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971), I intend a 'good enough childhood' to signify one in which a child is relatively safe and nurtured, in accordance with standards set and shared by the community of which the child's family is a part. In addition, I hope the phrase allows for some rhetorical distance from the project of judging what would make a perfect childhood, as if such an entity could exist. Instead, definitions of childhood are constructed in particular social contexts, and just what makes one 'good enough' depends on local definitions as well as the availability of resources to carry them out (Ruddick, 1998).

Some scholars have noted that definitions of an adequate childhood vary considerably depending on family socioeconomic status. In her exhaustive ethnography of family life, Annette Lareau found that working-class and middle-class children's lives differed dramatically (Lareau, 2003). Middle-class families worked to provide their children with 'concerted cultivation', involving the development of skills and talents through teams, lessons and tutors, while families of more limited means pursued a strategy that Lareau dubbed 'the accomplishment of natural growth'. Influenced by Bourdieu, Lareau investigated how class-inflected child rearing laid down certain *dispositions* with implications for future class mobility. While the childhoods she examined differed in other ways as well, it was in the organization of daily life that family consumption practices were most implicated. Middle-class children's lives were scheduled around practices and performances while working-class and poor children had more free time and spent far more of it in front of the television (Lareau, 2003). Good enough working-class and poor childhoods, according to this picture, were also less expensive to provide.

However, other studies have found that childhoods look remarkably similar when we compare their material goods. Patricia Berhau (2000), a student of Lareau's working with the same fertile data, found that while both poor and affluent families may have bought the same sneakers for their child, families diverged in the processes of acquisition leading up to the purchase. Affluent families would make

a last-minute decision to stop off at a sporting goods shop on the way home from an afternoon at the movies . . . likely place the sneakers on a credit card, paying all or most of the balance off at the end of the month. Failing to do so may require an occasional stock liquidation to relieve the debt, but would not significantly alter the family's buying habits. (Berhau, 2000: 334)

In contrast, in working-class or poor families, parents would scan sale papers and store prices, put away a little each week towards the purchase, take on extra hours of work to pay for it or solicit contributions from the child. Because of their income constraints, Berhau argued, poor and working-class consumers shared a particular time orientation in which 'small and (near) immediate intervals of time [were] meaningful and relevant' (2000: 337), as well as a cognitive clarity, brought about by pointed thinking and planning about near-term issues of acquisition. In each family, however, she points out, 'the children in question may very well wind up with identical sneakers' (2000: 334).

When we consider Lareau and Berhau together, we might surmise that while the organization of time in childhoods varies widely according to class, the distribution of stuff is more similar; in other words, parents of varying socioeconomic backgrounds seem to largely agree on the material basis of a 'good enough' childhood. However, for the poorest of families, the cost of that agreement is high: in a highly unequal society like the USA, families differ widely in their capacity to meet these perceived needs (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities/Economic Policy Institute, 2002). While the provision of all that goes into 'concerted cultivation' is expensive – the lessons, instruments, uniforms and travel – buying even the basics of childhood, from balls to backpacks to back-to-school clothes, also requires significant outlays. Thus, quantitative researchers have found that poor families spend disproportionately *more* on children than their rich counterparts, suggesting that children's needs are perceived to be more fixed than adults' in a context of severe income constraints (Lazear and Michael, 1988; Mayer, 1997).

Daniel Miller's work provides an explanation for this prioritization of

children's needs. In *A Theory of Shopping* (1998), Miller portrays shopping as a ritual of sacrifice, transforming 'mere expenditure' into relationships of love and care. Shopping is the way in which consumers (primarily mothers) make the relationships within the family through the 'daily conscientiousness' of thinking about the individual preferences of those for whom they buy. In this sense, consumption is objectified love (Miller, 1998).

Miller's treatise is important, as it recognizes consumption as an act that makes connections, contrary to popular notions of it as an individual solipsistic act 'devoted largely to indulging itself' (1998: 68). But, perhaps surprisingly given his thesis about how it constitutes relationships, shopping is ultimately portrayed as a one-way activity, a 'gift' or 'sacrifice', without regard for its reception. A crucial feature of the experience of provisioning is, of course, the interactive element: members of the household (including children, as I have written about elsewhere; see Pugh [2003a]) reflect, reject or rework the terms of intimacy embodied in the consumption done on their behalf.

Children are central to Elizabeth Chin's (2001) ethnography on consumption in a primarily African American low-income community in New Haven. Chin's nine- and 10-year-old informants are active agents in producing their own childhoods, moving their birthday parties to protect their cakes from marauding brothers, participating in elaborate exchange rituals in the school lunchroom and considering the needs of their household others when making purchases. Chin powerfully evokes the creative ways in which the children handle the symbolic and material oppressions implicated in their social contexts of bleak urban settings and, at the nearby mall, luxurious consumer 'possibilities'. Her focus on the children stands out for its unusual reckoning of their roles in constructing their lives. Nonetheless, caregivers are given only the most shadowy treatment in the book, thus eliding much of the extensive child-rearing consumption that goes into providing a good enough childhood, even in low-income settings.

From the perspective of low-income caregivers, the equation of care and consumption puts them in a precarious position. On the one hand, they want to participate fully in a consumer culture that uses consumption to make and shape relationships of love and care; on the other hand, their resource constraints severely curtail their ability to provide for all household needs without interruption. They are, as Zygmunt Bauman (1998) writes, 'flawed consumers'. As Power (2003) argues, the desire to avoid being considered flawed consumers and, thus, flawed mothers shapes the consumption practices of low-income women caregivers. Indeed, Power's

welfare-reliant informants asserted that ‘one of their highest priorities was to try to ensure that their children fit in with their peers, even if household items, food or personal items for themselves had to be sacrificed to do so’ (2003: 4). The low-income women in Edin and Lein’s landmark study *Making Ends Meet* agreed: ‘You gotta do what you gotta do to make your kids feel normal’, one mother said flatly (1997: 30).

The drive to ‘do what you gotta do’ conflicts with the reality of available resources in many low-income households in the US, where more than one in every six children lives in poverty (Madrick, 2002). How do income constraints shape and alter the child-rearing consumption of low-income parents? How do these practices influence the family relationships thus constituted?

I investigated these questions through interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in three sites in Oakland. In brief, I found that the *instability* of income was as influential as the *scarcity* of income for my low-income respondents, as they tried to construct their versions of a good enough childhood, with important implications for parent–child relationships.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The data from which I investigated these questions come from ongoing qualitative research in the city of Oakland near San Francisco on the US West coast. Oakland is a particularly apt site to study child rearing, consumption and inequality, as it has been found to be one of the most unequal cities of its size, having a high poverty rate coupled with a higher percentage of affluent families with children than is the average in other comparably sized cities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001). Area housing costs are high, being among the top five least affordable metropolitan areas, requiring an hourly wage of almost \$24 to afford an average two-bedroom apartment (National Low-income Housing Coalition, 2001). One study suggests that single-parent families need to make at least \$54,069 per year to make ends meet in the San Francisco Bay area, while dual-parent families need to come up with \$61,593 (California Budget Project, 2001).

This article relies on data from a year of fieldwork in a low-income community in West Oakland, where I volunteer at a local after-school program for children aged five to eight. I call this facility the Sojourner Truth Center, a reference to the 19th-century black feminist activist. It and the names of the informants quoted in this article are pseudonyms. At the center, about 30 of the 35 school-aged kids are African American; the rest are of Chinese, Mexican or other Central American descent. Some of the kids have two parents in their household, but most are from single-parent

homes. Tuition is subsidized on a sliding scale by the city of Oakland. Most of the families pay nothing and there is a long waiting list to get in.

I also conducted interviews with adults and children in 10 low-income families enrolled in the program. Their self-reported incomes are on average \$18,600 – well below the constructed ‘minimum necessary’ to survive in the region and only \$200 higher than the federal poverty line for a family of four. In addition, I interviewed 12 middle-class parents whose average income is \$99,000, peaking at \$230,000. Half of these parents came from an email solicitation to a local parent community listserv and half came from a school site in an upper-income area of Oakland.

Interviews were semi-structured, focussing in part on the ‘magnified moments’ of social ritual, and, with the adults, were in-depth, lasting between 1.5 and three hours. I interviewed most of the adults twice, as I found this helped to confirm impressions, rectify errors and, most important, develop trust. In addition, I accompanied caregivers while they shopped, thus observing how they consumed amid considerations of relationship, need, desire, constraints and competition – the social contexts of ‘caring consumption’ (Chin, 2001; Miller, 1998).

The total absence of any non-ethnicized ‘white’ kids at the Sojourner Truth Center is testimony to the convergence of class and ‘race’ in Oakland and to the concentration of poverty in the Wilson Elementary School intake zone feeding into Sojourner Truth.¹ Among my more affluent informants, however, while two-thirds of the children were white, one-third were African-American, with the sample’s most affluent family being an African-American couple ensconced in the nearby hills. Thus, the juxtaposition of low-income and upper-income respondents that sometimes comes through the data cannot be read solely as a comparison of ‘rich whites’ versus ‘poor people of color’. Since the primary points I make below have to do with differential access to money, I refer to my informants mostly by their income status. At the same time, I understand that ‘class’ is inherently ‘raced’ in America, so that the pervasive confluence of being black, poor and urban is not a coincidence, but the result of decades of institutional practices (Conley, 1999; Massey et al., 1994; Ortner, 1998). Where it bears noting, I refer to some of the structural causes of my low-income respondents’ unstable sources of money and goods, including outright discrimination and racialized poverty.

Class is not a term whose definition enjoys much consensus in social science. I understand class to be a relational concept whereby people define it as opposed to one another. For my purposes here, I consider it a combination of education, income and occupation; while I refer most of the time

to my informants' income status, the two groups of sampled respondents also fall into rather starkly different groups with regard to the other measures. None of my low-income participants had a college degree, although a few had some post-secondary education and, if they were employed, had jobs such as a nurse's assistant or retail clerk. In contrast, almost all of my upper-income group had college degrees and, if they were employed, had jobs such as a headhunter or marketing consultant.

This research is part of an ongoing project that focusses on families with children in three elementary schools: one private school, for which parents pay annual tuition fees of more than \$12,000; a public school in which 93 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price lunches (a federal program available only to families below an income standard of, for example, \$34,040 for a family of four); and a public school with only 4 percent of its students qualifying for free lunches. I conducted interviews and fieldwork in all three locations in order to compare child rearing and consumption within social contexts that vary by community as well as individual family resources.

I chose to study children aged five to nine because parents are still heavily engaged in constructing the childhoods of children this young, and yet these informants are old enough to demand, challenge and strategize about caregiver buying (James and Prout, 1996). I also intentionally chose to use a community sampling in which my informants knew each other via the schools and to some extent lived in the same social world. This design served three purposes: first, it enabled me to avoid recruiting individuals on the basis of class, family structure, race or other social categories that I would have had to presume were salient before they opened their mouths; second, I was better able to consider the effects of community resources and norms on child rearing when my respondents overlapped to even a partial degree; and, third, several informants bearing witness can offer contested versions of events and characterizations that allowed for a more complete and complex picture.

I analyzed transcribed interviews and fieldnotes for discernible patterns and contradictions that shed light on the proposed research questions. Distinct categories were identified and coded accordingly. Data analysis proceeded in steps described by Emerson et al. (1995), involving the development of 'themes' and the use of analytic memos.

As a white middle-class researcher delving into the lives of low-income families of color, I am aware of the danger I pose to my informants. Despite being a parent myself, and even though this work is part of a larger project which includes families with much higher incomes and socioeconomic

status than my own, I understand the potential for exoticizing my participants' responses. There is a risk that I would make these informants some kind of 'other' for measuring them up against white middle-class child-rearing consumption norms (Collins, 1991).

That said, I subscribe to the notion that it is possible for outsiders to study a group, that in fact, upon reflection, one's standpoint can afford particular insights into trends and customs of groups of which one is or is not a part. In addition, a working assumption underlying this research is that all parents have priorities that stem in part from local understandings of what is normal and what is good and, further, that some of these priorities would look strange or unjustified to parents of other groups. Certainly, there is hardly an enterprise as subject to judgement by others as is parenting; everyone has been a child, if not a parent themselves, and thus everyone has an opinion. Yet, I view my task in this study as being, in part, to make understandable each group's practices, where they diverge, to others. Thus, if one group spends a lot of money on school pictures, another group schedules after-school time or uses prescription drugs to control children's behavior – we all can look askew to outsiders. The more important task is rendering that view comprehensible.

MONEY IN THE AIR . . . BUT NOT IN THE POCKET

A few blocks from the highway, amid the small houses, iron fences and busy stoops of West Oakland and across the street from the Wilson Elementary School, a long low cement building housing the Sojourner Truth after-school center is flanked by two asphalt playgrounds. The gate to the left playground stands ajar, and parents, older siblings and babysitters leave cars curbside, sometimes idling, to go through it unchallenged, re-emerging with a child in tow. In the playground, kids sometimes play basketball, with the space between two of the monkey bars acting as a hoop, or swing an old telephone wire for a double-dutch jump rope or kick dead balls from one end of the yard to the other, running to retrieve them as they land and stay put.

One afternoon, the head teacher Ms Plum and I sit on a bench in the playground, and Alvin, a small African American kindergartener, comes over. 'I got \$25', he announces. 'You have \$25? That's more money than I have', says Ms Plum. 'How'd you get that money? Is it in your bank?', she asks. Alvin nods. 'You save that money. It's better to save money than to spend it.' He jumps onto the climbing structure as a man arrives to pick up his daughter and stops to chat with Ms Plum. He is half Mexican, half Puerto Rican, about 35 years old, and he is going fishing that weekend.

They talk about the kind of fish they like. She asks about his boat and he mentions that he received a \$600 ticket for doing 80mph on a lake. His daughter, a first grader with pigtails, comes over with her backpack on, ready to go, and Ms Plum tells her: 'Show him your tongue and then you can remember what you owe me.' Her tongue is bright blue, the telltale blue of the 'icys' that Ms Plum sells for 25 cents each to raise money for summer field trips. 'You can get that out of your money, girl', the father tells her, grinning.

Money is everywhere at the Sojourner Truth Center, at least in people's talk. Adults talk about how much things cost them, about cars and TVs and swim classes and birthday cakes. Kids and adults negotiate for candy and snacks from Ms Plum. Kids trade stories about the tooth fairy, about birthday presents, about the money they get from adults for treats.

Nonetheless, evidence abounds of the tight budgets into which these families squeeze themselves. One little girl wears sandals with the back strap cut through so that her feet can still fit in them, even as her heels hang over the back. Patricia and her sister Linda have little sausage bodies that hang out over and through their old tight clothes, pants that are too short and shirts several sizes too small. For several weeks, Delisha carries a cheap blue bag that she explains she got on a giveaway day at a local store. Ms Plum makes sure that parents know that this or that service or class is free and hands parents some of the extra food that the center receives for holidays – bags of chips, pickles – which the parents gladly carry away, their kids dragging their book bags alongside them.

My preliminary findings suggest that, just as important as resource *constraints* in shaping the construction of child rearing for low-income families, however, is *what those resources are like* when they do arrive. Among the low-income families in my sample, central to the experience of money in this world is its seeming unpredictability. From the kids' perspective, sometimes their parents had money and sometimes they didn't, and little that the child did had any effect on the matter. The very instability of money had broad implications for the daily lives of low-income children, a phenomenon that I term windfall child rearing and that I discuss further below.

WINDFALLS AND BAD LUCK

For the most part, the flow of money and goods was unpredictable for low-income families because it depended on four unstable sources: variable access to government assistance; the ebb and flow of the availability of low-paid service work; the sporadic largess of friends and relatives; and the winds

of good and bad fortune, to which these families of limited means remained particularly susceptible in an environment of structured racism and concentrated poverty.

Government assistance

The most significant public assistance offered to these families is in affordable housing programs, particularly the Section 8 voucher program, by which renters pay a subsidized rate to landlords, who receive the balance of a fair market rate from federal authorities. A tight rental market, such as exists in the San Francisco Bay area, makes landlords less inclined to go through the added hassle of the extra paperwork to be a Section 8 participant and, thus, there is a finite number of apartment owners who take the vouchers. The program's biggest flaw, however, is its limited scope; it has received far more eligible applicants than it can provide for at its current funding levels. The program is currently closed to new applicants and last accepted new applications in December 2001, when it received more than 12,700. 'We do not anticipate opening our Section 8 waiting list until 2005', the website stated drily in the fall of 2003. Section 8 vouchers can be passed down from parent to child and can also be awarded under special circumstances, such as in cases of 'family reunification', when parents are able to retrieve children from foster care.

One of my low-income informants, Mary, had been stuck in an abusive relationship when she realized that, in order to get out, she would have to find a place to live for she and her kids:

Mary: So I applied first for Section 8, not knowing, not ever thinking, that I was going to get it as soon as I did. Because it usually takes people five, six years. I got it in a year.

AJP: How did that happen?

Mary: I don't know, I don't know. Gods. The universe. I don't know. And then, as a matter of fact, I had kind of forgotten that I had did it.

AJP: Right.

Mary: Because when I did it and I tried . . . I remember they had ran something in the paper, in the newspaper. And I filled out the application and I mailed it. And I never heard anything from them. . . . So when I was in Southern California my mom called and she says, you know, 'you got something from the housing authority'. And I was like, 'no way, you're kidding!'.

AJP: Wow, it's like the jackpot.

Mary: I said, 'open it!'. And she opened it and she said, 'you've been accepted'. I was like, 'aaaaahhhhhh!'.

The enormous waiting list makes the day you find out that you are entitled to Section 8 feel like winning the lottery; indeed, in a market where a two-bedroom apartment in a dangerous neighborhood can cost \$1000 monthly, the savings are considerable.

Availability of work

Some of the families at the Sojourner Truth Center had regular service jobs and long-term employment histories as security guards, nurse's aides or transportation workers. Others had more intermittent records, particularly those who worked in retail. The closing of a Kmart superstore in the area had hit several families hard. During the winter holiday season, Labor Day and other peak shopping periods, parents took on extra jobs or worked overtime to bring in extra money. This kind of employment – sporadic and temporary – often gave families a small momentary infusion of funds before the jobs melted away with the customers.

Friends and family

My low-income informants offered stories that suggested that they would not be able to get by without a particular friend or family member, while, in the same breath, telling of the friend who stole from them or the partner who was only a drain on their resources. Jackie reported making \$882 per month in food stamps and aid from CalWORKS, the state program that replaced welfare. However, her rent for a tiny two-bedroom apartment to house her five-person family, located next to a crack house, was \$975 per month and she was not eligible for Section 8, she said, because of a previous felony conviction. How does she get by? Her first son's 73-year-old grandfather gives her money for rent and other items: 'He's been dishing out a lot. Like he comes up with part of the rent and \$375 for each month's bills, too. Plus gas for the car. [Her son's] haircut money.' She knows that the arrangement is not reliable in the long term, however, and her husband is working two jobs to be ready for the change:

Grandpa already told us – he loves us, but he's bold, too – he goes, 'You got a man who needs to go out and provide because I'm really old and I need to save my money for retirement'. That's what he said. Which is understandable. That's true.

On the other hand, Lashona, who has two kids and is training to be a nurse's aide, describes her boyfriend as a drain on her resources and also invokes traditional gender ideologies to underscore her outrage: 'This isn't the way it's supposed to be, where the man is living off of the woman and her kids, living off of her Section 8 and her food stamps.' Yet, she's reluctant to kick him out because he saved her when she was homeless, apart from her children and living in a motel with no way to pay for another week:

Lashona: So then that week was up. And it was a Friday. And I met him. So he let me come and stay with him. He didn't even know me.

AJP: Wow.

Lashona: It was so weird. I said, 'wait a minute, something is wrong with this picture'. This man, something is wrong with him, you don't just let people come to your house. I don't know.

AJP: He must have had a good feeling that you wouldn't . . .

Lashona: But it was just me. And that's what he said, he said he didn't feel like he had to worry about anything. And he had to go to work that night. He let me stay there by myself. And the next day I had the key and everything just started going. And then he went to court every time I had to go to court. He went to every meeting, every visit – everything until I got the kids back. I got the kids back. We got the kids back the day before Thanksgiving. And we cooked a big Thanksgiving dinner.

Carol Stack (1974) and others have documented the ways in which social networks simultaneously buoy up the poor – at times enabling them to survive – *and* hold them back from individual mobility projects. My informants corroborate this finding. Yet, these arrangements are not at all stable, relying, as they do, on the shifting fortunes of others in this community on the edge. The aid often seems to require some level of desperation to present itself before it comes forth, diverted from other less immediately pressing needs. Then, and only then, and only for the fortunate who have them, do friends and family come up with something to meet the emergency. While it seems that they can often count on friends and family to step in, therefore, low-income families cannot budget for such help as if it were income, but rather only welcome it as parched earth greets rain.

The caprice of fortune

Weather is an apt analogy for the forces of luck buffeting low-income families in my sample, luck that Berhau (2000) termed 'normal accidents'.

My informants mostly used a passive language, often of luck or fortune rather than personal efficacy or religion, to describe their evolving situations, for example, 'we came into money' as opposed to 'I earned more money' or 'thanks to God's grace, we . . .'.

As we learn from recent scholarship on natural disasters, however, social forces like poverty and racism affect the way luck is experienced (Klinenberg, 2002). Families had cars that broke down or were stolen, requiring significant outlays to retrieve them from city lots. At the same time, the cars they drove were older and they parked them in areas of higher crime, given that these were the neighborhoods they lived in. Parents suffered from depression and anxiety that impeded their ability to function, to get ahead at work or to reliably transport their kids to school. Low-income people are more prone to psychological distress as well as other health problems (Williams and Collins, 1995), as the daily grind of poverty and the difficulties of maintaining a household in such strained circumstances surely make depression and anxiety more likely. Many of my low-income informants talked about moving out of their dangerous and poverty-stricken neighborhoods, but most had been dissuaded by the daunting search for apartments that owners would be prepared to rent to them. Lashona told a story in which one owner confirmed that he took Section 8 over the phone, so she and her boyfriend, both African American, went over there to meet him, dressed carefully in clean and tidy clothes. However, when they got there, he informed her that it had been rented since they got off the phone, an incident certainly suggestive of discrimination. The prevalence of such racialized practices, particularly around housing, contributing in part to the extensive residential segregation in US cities, makes the 'luck' of finding a good apartment more structured than just happenstance.

Is money more unpredictable for low-income families than for more affluent groups? Do only low-income families get windfalls or hit bad luck? In my sample, middle-income families did not talk about unreliable money, but this silence perhaps stemmed from the fact that their predictable base incomes were high enough to make the extras flowing in and out less noticeable. While people in middle-income families also got depressed or found their cars had been stolen or received a higher than expected tax refund, it did not make or break their budget for living.

WINDFALL CHILD REARING

For parents and children, the implications of experiencing money like the rain – capricious, unpredictable and yet necessary for life – are great. With the windfall child rearing that ensues, parents are limited as to how much

their consumption for their children can be linked to behavior goals, they lose a critical source of parent–child connectedness during periods of high conflict, such as adolescence, and they cannot escape an image of parental helplessness before their watchful children. In addition, when money is available, my low-income informants told me that they would buy their kids small items, like letting them buy a lip gloss at the corner store. Thus, in what is often a compensatory move, parents pass down to their children the experience of money as windfall, in that they cannot grant more stable regular access to resources they don't have (Pugh, 2002). Finally, windfall child rearing teaches children that money does not reflect moral worth, but rather just someone's good luck.

No behavior modification

If money is not predictably there, parents cannot use it to reward their children's good behavior, such as completing homework or chores. Even if they do reward their kids later, the time and distance between the good behavior and the reward will often erode the message that parents might be intending to send. Therefore, without links to behavior, buying signifies love, social networks and obligations to care – more like 'I appreciate you' than 'I appreciate what you did'. These messages are more like that which contemporary parenting advice books, often aimed at middle-class readers, suggest will make a child feel valued, but they are not the messages my low-income informants necessarily preferred sending. I asked Carol, a nurse's aide with three kids living with her, when she gave her children money. She answered: 'When they're good. When I have extra money to give them. When they do what they're told. Most of the time that's never!'

No material ties that bind

In a related vein, when children and their caregivers are experiencing conflict, sometimes material ties may be among the only strands connecting them. Particularly in adolescence, control over a car or movie money can be the one thing linking the teenager to the adult. Without the ability to command that kind of material power, low-income parents face the challenge of relying solely on their emotional ties with their children to exert their influence.

Impotence before an audience

Low-income parents cannot escape leaving the impression with their children of parental helplessness. All children go through a stage of denouement when they realize that their parents are not omnipotent. My data

suggest that low-income parents convey that message earlier and to a more profound degree than more affluent parents. Adults demonstrate their inability to secure funds from government sources or employers when needed and this powerlessness can also seed a certain impotence in interpersonal relationships. Brenda noticed that her older brother had developed strategies for keeping his own money, even when her mother needed it for groceries or other family necessities:

Brenda: He hides the money where my mom can't get it. And he hides it where she can't even find it.

AJP: And how come he doesn't have to, you know, 'look, Nicholas, we need food and you've got to help us?'. How come that . . .

Brenda: My mom does ask him.

AJP: How come it doesn't work?

Brenda: He says no.

AJP: He just says no?

Brenda: Sometimes he says no.

At the same time, this powerlessness must be juxtaposed with the particular savvy I witnessed among several of my low-income informants when they handled creditors and cashiers. They may not have been able to secure long-term or well-paid employment or do much about when a government check would arrive, but they knew which companies' bills to pay first and how to conduct themselves with other low-wage workers so that they would get refunds they were due or overcharging corrected.

Windfall childhood

None of my low-income families administered any sort of regular allowance, as there just wasn't enough extra money around on a regular basis to dole out to the kids predictably. That said, the kids often had money. They got it when their father dropped by on a morning visit or from their neighbor who let them work in the backyard every once in a while or from their mother when she returned from the mailbox, check in hand. Sometimes parents even took their children's money, such as when Brenda's mother used part of \$60 that Brenda received from her non-custodial father in order to buy groceries for the home. 'She only took a little bit', Brenda said carefully.

One day at the Sojourner Truth Center, Vivian asked her mom Lashona

for a quarter for an 'icy'. 'No, you can't', her mother said shortly and without elaborating. Jackie, another mother and a neighbor, pulled out a quarter and handed it to Vivian without fanfare, presuming (correctly, as it turned out) that her mother's 'no' came from money woes and not as an edict against sweets. For comparison's sake, we can see that it could have been a shocking thing to do in a middle-income environment, as such an act would be perceived as intervening in a private family issue.

The kids' experience with money mirrored that of the adults in their lives. As such, they came to understand it as a random but powerful entity, with the ability to confer autonomy and re-establish social connections, but only as an unexpected pleasure.

Lady Luck, not Horatio Alger

The seemingly random quality of money, disconnected as it was from how much their parents worked or whether or not they had been good children, belied the ideology of the American dream and its promise of getting ahead through assiduous and honest labor. Disassociated from moral worth and purity, money became something you got when you were lucky, not because you were good. For all sorts of American families, the tooth fairy and Santa Claus are conduits of money and objects to children, conduits that use myth and ritual to obscure the true parental origins of this largess. In a very low-income urban environment such as Sojourner Truth, it all feels like the tooth fairy.

WINDFALL 'CHILDING'

Windfall child rearing has equally important ramifications for what I term 'childing' or the project of growing up in interaction with one's caregiving adults. If most money is a windfall, then negotiating or using logical arguments is not the way to get more of it. Rather, children at Sojourner Truth seemed engaged in short bursts of emotional tactics of wheedling, cajoling and pleading that subsided relatively quickly if rejected. Sometimes, mainly in interactions with each other, the children grabbed, stole or 'borrowed' money and/or possessions. Most often, I saw a culture of restraint, corroborating the findings of other researchers (Chin, 2001; Lareau, 2003).

In contrast, middle- to upper-income kids negotiated, whined, staged emotional episodes and, in general, were more persistent in communicating their desires. When Chloe, the elder daughter in an upper-income family, wanted to raise her allowance from \$2 per week, she made a yearly budget that included items like 'notebooks', 'pens' and 'gifts for family' which, when averaged out over the year, came to \$6 per week (see Figure 1). Her parents,

8/01

[Redacted] Allowance List

1. Books: \$5-\$10	12x	120
2. Jewelry/accessories: \$5-\$13	8 3	40 360
3. Lipgloss/cosmetics: \$3-\$6	7x	210
4. Extra Clothing: \$10-\$30	3x	90
5. Treats: 10¢-\$1.50	24x	24
6. Misc. Toys/Harry Potter stuff: \$2-\$15	4x	40
7. Gifts for family members: \$1-\$5	3x	15
8. Notebooks: 25¢-\$5	4x	12
9. Pens: 50¢-\$5	6x	12
	50	453
		45
		408
		388
		<u>328</u>
		<u>56</u>

Figure 1: Chloe's allowance list

a university professor and a stay-at-home mother, reviewed the list and conceded her arguments had merit and, thus, her negotiations were successful.

While Chloe's tactics were unusual, even for one in her social milieu, they were unheard of among the low-income sample. One could argue that this was due to parenting differences, including varying degrees of

comfort with linguistic tactics or familiarity with budgets and presentations. Undoubtedly, these factors are components that contribute to shaping these children's behavior. However, the hard fact that, in low-income families, there was no money to vie for most of the time made such maneuvering as Chloe's entirely inappropriate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I have argued that families' differential access to steady income and expenses leads, for low-income caregivers, to a phenomenon that I have dubbed windfall child rearing. Unstable resources serve to disassociate the time when parents buy for children from the time when the children ask for something, when they need it or when they exhibit good behavior. This separation in time has ramifications for children's daily lives, for how they behave and how they interpret consumption practices. Thus, beyond the short-term time orientation that Berhau discerned among her working-class and poor informants, I found that low-income families shared an experience of *time fragmentation* that affected their child rearing.

Previous research into the impact of resources on child rearing has contended that low-income families are fighting off images of the 'flawed consumer' and the 'flawed mother' and that the conflation of these two ideas may comprise a sort of symbolic oppression, to use Chin's (2001) words (see also Power, 2003). The specter of these images could be what is leading such families to render children's expenses more fixed and less reducible than those of adults in an environment of severe income constraints. As families 'do what they gotta do', the price of normalcy grows ever higher (Cross, 1997). In addition, it is possible that windfall child rearing also leads parents to spend more, since the delay in buying the item might erode parents' ability to replace it with something smaller or bargain with the child, as they attempt to constitute their relationship with the child, but do so (in both the child's and the parents' eyes) late.

This research, while suggestive, is preliminary; planned comparisons with upper-income families and with mixed-income settings will enable us to ascertain with confidence how much windfall child rearing is limited to lower-income populations. I have also written elsewhere about the effect of windfall child rearing in the income-homogeneous classroom, finding an absence of teasing that I argue is related in part to the instability of honor-through-possession in this setting (Pugh, 2003b). In addition, further research could establish the extent to which windfall child rearing exists in other racial/ethnic groups, including poor whites. Such work would illuminate the degree to which friends and families contribute to

the waxing and waning of personal wherewithal among other social groups less well known for their reciprocal networks.

With this research on caregivers and their relationship to children around consumption, I have tried to center the experience of low-income people. How households spend their money is one route to understanding present day inequality and the ways it is experienced in families making tradeoffs between one choice and another. In addition, how and when parents spend their money on children provide a glimpse of inequality's future as part and parcel of constructing the different childhoods that are the pathways leading to different adult lives (Bourdieu, 1984). Through the prism of consumption, we can view the construction of good enough childhoods in different social contexts to understand how children and adults across the income ladder make meaning out of the experience of inequality.

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Note

1. I use quotation marks to underscore the paradox that 'race' is a biological fiction, but a social fact, with a palpable, albeit varying, impact on people's daily lives.

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