Distinction, boundaries or bridges?: Children, inequality and the uses of consumer culture

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Abstract

Much existing work in the sociology of culture implicitly assumes actor motivations of status and domination. Yet this theoretical consensus attends only glancingly to the flip side of such behavior: those moments when people deploy culture, not only in a mobility project, but to connect. Based on a three-year ethnography of children's consumer culture in three diverse communities, I find that children often use consumer culture to belong—both to connect to others, and to achieve visibility in their social worlds. I contend that children's common desires make inequality, particularly in their access to consumer goods, a challenge to the accomplishment of the connection for which they strive. Using insights from Erving Goffman and Randall Collins, I find children use processes of facework to navigate the problems arising from their differences from others, including those stemming from discrepancies in commodity possession. Out of five facework processes that I identify, I elaborate upon two that seem to challenge the notion that children seek sameness. Children's goals for consumer culture also differed from those of (particularly affluent) adults. I suggest scholars need to reconsider their theoretical emphasis on exclusion over inclusion, and document the circumstances under which each is particularly salient.

1. Introduction

Culture scholars have largely turned away from the study of values and beliefs to the study of culture as the symbolic repertoires and resources that shape the meanings people make and deploy, often in service to their own strategic ends. Yet in abandoning the debate about ''values,'' scholars seemed to have also shelved a debate over people's motivation or interests. Instead much work in the field brackets the question entirely, and forges ahead on the implicit assumption that what people want is to better their neighbors, to move up, to ''get ahead.'' While this tradition highlights important notions of power and inequality, it elides what Ortner (1984, p. 157) called

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''the other side of the coin of social being''—''cooperation, reciprocity, and solidarity.'' Yet attending instead to Durkheim's collective effervescence of belonging does not necessarily mean shunting inequality aside, since it is when people use culture to connect that inequality poses some of its most powerful challenges. How do people striving for solidarity manage problems of lack?

I investigated the uses of culture in a three-year ethnographic study of children's consumer meanings and desires in three starkly unequal communities in the United States. Consumer culture is a compelling arena in which to study how people enlist meanings in their daily lives. At the same time, children, especially those aged 5–9 who comprise the core of this ethnography, often do not control what they own, and thus provide a good opportunity to see how social actors handle momentary deprivation, bringing questions of inequality and belonging to the fore.

I found that children used commodified objects and experiences both to connect with each other and to achieve a certain visibility, rather than to dominate others, in their social worlds. They did so primarily through knowledgeable talk, in which even those without a particular item sought to participate. While competition was at times evident, children often proffered tales of common ownership or experience, or demonstrated particular shared skills. Efforts such as these, with their focus on belonging, do not fit easily within prevailing emphases in culture theory. Children in this context also appeared less concerned about asserting distinction than were adults, particularly affluent adults, suggesting that one problem with existing research on culture is that it has focused almost exclusively on adults. In this article, I outline the processes of ''facework,'' through which children work to manage, hide, and even overcome their differences.

Thus this article makes two central arguments. First, that children often use consumer culture to connect, to belong, to be full citizens of their social world, all to a degree that suggests that existing scholarship needs to shift its emphasis from documenting exclusion to attending to inclusion as well. Second, that children's common desires in these contexts make inequality, particularly of access to consumer goods, something to manage, a challenge to the accomplishment of the connection for which they often strive. Thus the core question this article seeks to answer is: How do people handle moments of inequality when those moments can inhibit the connections to others that they seek? To appropriately frame this inquiry, however, we need to first dislodge the fixity of distinction as the cultural frame.

2. The dominance of strategy

Many culture scholars seem to have arrived at a loose consensus that people use repertoires of available ideas and action—the components of culture—for strategic ends (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lamont and Small, 2008; Sewell, 1992; Swidler, 1986, 2001; Vaisey, 2009a). Yet scholars are not devoting a lot of energy to just what these strategic ends are (Kaufman, 2004; see Hitlin and Piliavin, 2004; Swedberg, 2005; Vaisey, 2009b; Wuthnow, 2008 for exceptions). Part of this reluctance may stem from a wholesale rejection of the notion of culture as the ''values'' that establish the ends towards which people strive, values which were in earlier scholarship often portrayed as collectively held, persistent and important even without material expression, and independent of context, circumstance or social location (cf. Parsons and Edward, 1951).

Yet in clearing the decks of ''end values,'' scholars effectively exchanged an explicit, overarching story of culturally derived aspirations for an implicit reliance on micro-level ''interests,'' a reliance that seems to assume as much about people as did the earlier works. Culture scholars—particularly those who are concerned with inequality—seem to have reverted to a small-scale version of the interest-maximizing actor, in which people's interests involve

simply ''getting ahead'' in whatever context they find themselves. Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) influential oeuvre, for example, argues that people make distinctions from each other that are real in their consequences, as they embody ways to differentiate themselves from those whom they denigrate. Lamont's (1992, 2000) work has built upon this framework, arguing that people do not always call on cultural capital—knowledge of the right operas or the right way to hold a fork—to do this boundary-making work, but rather sometimes rely upon financial success or moral precepts as ways to differentiate themselves. Yet for much of the scholarship in this tradition (see also Bryson, 1996; Holt, 1997, 1998), people's interests are presumed to be to ''get ahead,'' to make distinctions between themselves and those who are lower down on the social hierarchy, to assert themselves as different, and as better. Surely this is an assumption, however, with ''interests'' as culturally variable as the means—the schemas, signals, and resources—by which people view and achieve them.

It is not that all culture scholars, or even just these authors, fail to understand that exclusion and inclusion are intimately related, that boundaries are drawn to keep some people in, as much as to exclude others (Southerton, 2002; Warde, 1994). Rather it seems to be a question of emphasis, currently on exclusion as the cultural terrain of inequality. The prominence of distinction as a theoretical paradigm, however, has kept us from asking other important questions about inequality, specifically how it separates us, at the very moment when our desires converge. In so doing, it has kept scholars from attending closely to some of the most fraught, the most emotionally charged moments of social behavior.

A few scholars have focused on how people use culture to forge connections (e.g., DiMaggio, 1987; Fantasia, 1988; Illouz, 1997; Lichterman, 2005; Long, 2003). One recent offshoot has focused on the bridging versus bonding dimensions of cultural capital (Putnam, 2000), demonstrating that popular culture works to integrate groups across otherwise important social differences (Erickson, 1996; Lizardo, 2006).

Those who focus on small groups seem particularly aware of when people want to connect, such as in Fine's (1979) study of boys on baseball teams or his subsequent coauthored work on ''tiny publics'' as the roots of civic society (Fine and Harrington, 2004). Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) argued that small group norms, including linguistic cues and styles, can shape not only the way people interact, but also the kinds of ends people can want. Again, these are not the grandiose macro-level ends to which ''values'' were once thought to point the way, but micro-level interests in something other than simply looking better by comparison—interests in being accepted by a team, interests in finding community in a local bar, interests in being a part of local activism.

Erving Goffman is particularly relevant here. While Goffman himself maintained a rather Machiavellian view of interests, positing actors whose goals were clearly to best (or to put one over on) their interlocutors (clever Preedy), his account of smooth interaction as an accomplishment is profound (Goffman, 1967). Adding Collins' (2004a, 2004b) recent interventions, we can understand that people seek out situations of high emotional energy, which they get largely if not only from connections to other people, and they thus engage in interaction ritual chains that organize action. Such ''emotional entrainment,'' as Collins puts it, stems from sharing a bounded space, a particular focus of attention, and a common mood together. Following Durkheim, Collins helpfully considers the variable circumstances under which groups generate different kinds of action, arguing that small groups whose members rarely change, and who see each other frequently, are more likely to generate strong ties and strong consensus of what matters and what does not, as well as strong barriers to entry. Collins' theory posits that such entrainment acts like a magnet and motivating force for action, and thus he perhaps makes it sound too easy to connect with others, compared to what we know from other scholars, among them Goffman himself. Nonetheless, from

these two bodies of work, we can conclude that certain cultural contexts encourage in people the yearning to forge bonds with others, but to do so remains difficult, requiring their active management of interaction rituals, and that their ability as well as their inclination to do so is shaped by their capacities and contexts (Lichterman, 2005).

3. Consumer culture and connection

One medium through which people build these fragile bridges to each other is consumer culture. Cultural objects have been called ''shared significance embodied in form'' (Griswold, 1987, p. 4), while consumption has been dubbed a set of economic processes laden with ''continuously negotiated meaning-drenched social relations''—in other words, with culture (Zelizer, 2005a, p. 31). Indeed, Willis (1998, p. 8) argued consumption was ''the very means through which cultural choices are made, cultural identities forged.'' While scholars of consumer culture initially focused on how individuals buy to get ahead socially, with consumer goods representing a site of intense individualized competition, there is a research tradition that attends to a different sort of ''shared significance'' (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979): to material culture, instead, as a means of forging what Viviana Zelizer (2005b) has dubbed ''connected lives.'' Scholars have explored the ways in which people use consumer culture to create bonds, for example, in romantic couples (Illouz, 1997), among low-income African-American children (Chin, 2001), or among high-end car owners (Schulz, 2006). ''Popular culture provides the stuff of everyday sociability,'' as DiMaggio (1987, p. 444) observed.

Given that people sometimes use culture to connect, research about increasingly overlapping tastes is particularly germane. This scholarship centers on the finding that highly educated professionals have more omnivorous tastes across high and low culture, while the working class have more univore, restricted tastes (Lizardo, 2006; Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). Scholars have found this notion fertile ground, applying the theory to multiple international contexts, furiously specifying different kinds of omnivores, challenging the extent to which the theory captures contemporary trends in cultural consumption. But they have also focused on whether this empirical development means that taste has lost some of its distinguishing power in a globalizing world of many distinct ''taste publics,'' with most concluding that the very omnivore/univore distinction forms the basis of new kinds of domination and symbolic violence (e.g., Alderson et al., 2007; Coulangeon and Lemel, 2007; Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009; Warde et al., 1999).

It is my contention here, however, that these are the wrong questions, or at least not the only ones we should be asking. Indeed, the debate sometimes seems as if scholars tripped over this finding and then tried to discover what it means for the same old problem: assuming people strive for distinction, what are the implications of changing tastes for how distinction, hierarchy, exclusion happens? But what if we used these findings to instead ask a different question: given that people in some circumstances use culture to forge bonds, what are the implications of inequality for how people handle the experience of overlapping tastes? How does inequality shape the connections group members can forge?

When scholars focus on tastes, or desires, as conduits for distinction and domination, they do not have to explain how people handle situations when they do not have a particular item they want, because according to prevailing theory people sort themselves out first by their different tastes. Yet if disparate groups do not necessarily sift themselves apart with non-overlapping tastes, then the different resources people have to express their tastes, the different processes they have to go through to achieve their consumer desires, and the significance of doing so, become

more visible, more meaningful, and more fraught. Thus different questions come to the fore, questions that form the second important thrust of this article: How do group members navigate the demand for cultural repertoires—say, for particular consumer objects or commodified experiences—that they themselves do not have? How do group members handle the challenges of connecting, without the symbolic means the local culture has deemed necessary?

4. Children making do

Children can offer a uniquely revealing perspective on these questions. First, despite their growing purchasing power, children still have limited control of their own possessions, as much of what they have is procured for them by others, even in the United States and other affluent nations (Cook, 2008; McNeal, 2007; Pugh, 2004; Schor, 2004; Williams, 2005). This challenge throws into relief some of their coping strategies, as children's efforts to make do become more obvious than if they could just go out and buy whatever was missing from their list of must-haves. In addition, historical changes in the experience of childhood—the shrinking of family size, the departure of paid work from the home, the increase in the use of childcare, the largescale employment of mothers—mean more of them are spending more time outside of families, in the company of peers, than in earlier eras (Bianchi, 2000). Lastly, the contemporary organization of children's lives in the United States in schools, after-school programs, camps and the like, in which their time is increasingly spent in the company of nonrelated others in age-graded peer groups, predicts that these peer cultures are newly, vitally important for children's lives. As studies of children's culture suggest (Corsaro, 1985; Corsaro and Eder, 1990; Thorne, 1993), if we want to investigate the ways people use consumer culture to connect, to consider interests beyond those of presumed autonomous actors, children's daily lives are among the first places to look.

Studies of children and consumption have tended to focus on the impact of advertising, and on children as recipients of goods bought for them by caregivers, but the meanings of consumer culture for children themselves have been largely omitted (but see Chin, 2001; Katriel, 1987 for exceptions). Yet as Adler and Adler (1998, p. 206) wrote in their work on pre-adolescents, children do not ''perceive, interpret, form opinions about, or act on the world as unconnected individuals. Rather, they do all these things in concert with their peers, as they collectively experience the world.'' Unlike advertising, however, the influence of peers or peer communities on children's consumer desires has not been extensively studied (Martens et al., 2004). What we do know about the place of consumer goods in children's social worlds comes mostly from work with adolescents, and focuses more on status rather than connection (Croghan et al., 2006; Milner, 2004; but see Chee, 2000; Ritson and Elliott, 1999 for exceptions).

This study takes as its central focus the social interactions among children that give particular meaning to the products, services or commodified experiences children may have heard about elsewhere. From these interactions we can draw larger conclusions about the varied ends towards which people put culture to work, ends that transcend thin or unitary conceptions of ''interests,'' and which then make handling inequality a central, and particularly poignant, task.

5. Research design

5.1. Methods

This work is based on an ethnography of childhood consumer culture in California, involving observations of children at school and with their families, and interviews with parents and other

caregivers (Pugh, 2009).[1] I spent three years with the children of a public after-school program for low-income families I call Sojourner Truth, and six months with children in more affluent settings, a private school I call Arrowhead, and an elite public school I call Oceanview.[2] I also interviewed parents from 54 families, in visits generally lasting for 2–4 h, sometimes over several days, although data presented here is from fieldwork. I talked to teachers and other school staff, attended neighborhood meetings, award ceremonies, fundraisers, and festivals. Through these efforts, I immersed myself in the childhoods and parenthoods of people grappling every day with the exigencies of consuming for children, its practices and meanings. I excavated those meanings through a process of observation, note-taking, analysis, coding and memoing as outlined by Emerson et al. (1995).

I sought to sample groups of children that varied across race, class and gender, to evaluate the impact of inequality on consumer culture in childhood. The third largest city in California, Oakland is a fairly unequal city for its size, ranked by one study 10th in the nation for income inequality (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005). Oakland's poor children are not atypical of other urban centers in the United States: more than a third of children in Oakland's public schools are classified as English language ''learners;'' more than half of the city's children (56 percent) live in families where no adult had full-time year-round employment; and more than three-quarters of children enrolled in Oakland Unified were eligible for ''compensatory education,'' an aid category designated for low-achieving children from low-income households (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005; Ed-Data, 2006). Yet in 2003 Oakland was also 16th out of all U.S. cities in median household income (U.S. Census, 2003); and average home prices in some Oakland neighborhoods exceed $2 million even in 2008, a year of a pervasive housing slump (Zillow, 2008). In fact, the highest percentages of households in Oakland are those in both the top-fifth and the bottom-fifth of national income brackets (Brookings Institution, 2003). Class, race and geography intersect and overlap in Oakland, so that affluent whites, Asian-Americans and some African-Americans live in the hills looking out at the San Francisco Bay over the tracts of poor African-Americans, Latinos and some Asian-Americans living in the flats.

I chose the schools at which I would observe the children based on three criteria: high contrast in household income, which meant selecting public schools with very low and very high percentages of children eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch; language composition, in which I avoided schools with a large percentage of children with Limited English Proficiency, so that I would understand their playground interactions without an interpreter; and proximity to each other. I also chose to focus on children aged 5–9 because I hoped for respondents who already had consumer desires and could articulate them with each other, but also whose access to the market was still largely controlled by their parents. That way, the negotiated process of what the child would possess would be more visible and more consequential for the people involved, as opposed to older children who had greater access to their own money, or younger children, whose desires were perhaps more inchoate.

5.2. The three communities

The three communities differed sharply on the basis of class, race/ethnicity, family structure and other categories. At the Sojourner Truth after-school center, most families received a state subsidy to enroll their children. Parents, if they were employed, would pick up their kids wearing

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[1] This description of methods is a revised form of material found in Pugh (2009).

[2] All names of people and institutions, including some of their identifying details, have been changed to preserve their confidentiality.

their occupational uniforms—a butcher's apron, a security guard's epaulets. Some struggled to read and sign the permission forms the staff occasionally laid out for them for field trips. For these families, there was a certain porosity between home and the center, which was staffed by African-American women like themselves—parents would sometimes sit and chat with the center staff at great length about movies, weekend plans, conflicts with the (often white, middle-class) teachers at the elementary school across the street. All but a few of the children were African-American, and most of the children lived with their single mothers. The incomes of the families I interviewed from this group were on average $18,600, well below the "minimum necessary" researchers suggest is needed to make it in the region and only $200 higher than the federal poverty line for a family of four (California Budget Project, 2005).

In sharp contrast, a mere 7-min drive away, Oceanview Elementary sat nestled in the gentle hills of Oakland, the smell of bay laurel pervasive among the stucco mansions perched cheek by jowl. One of the draws in the neighborhood was the school, considered among the best public elementary schools in Oakland. Three-quarters of Oceanview's students are white and Asian, while those groups make up only one-fifth of the district's overall student population. Even more telling, just three children out of the school's 279 participate in the free- and reduced-price lunch program, a standard poverty measure, compared to 62.8 percent districtwide. The average income of my Oceanview informants was $166,600 and most of them were white, although one-third were affluent African-Americans.

At the third site, a private school I called Arrowhead, a set of buildings surrounded an open space about three-quarters the length of a soccer field. The open space was cut up into separate little play areas, with climbing structures and playing fields, towering swings and basketball hoops, and many trees arching and bending around the landscape. Surrounding the perimeter were tall steel fences; Arrowhead parents had to punch the codeword "love" into the mechanical lockbox to get in. On the other side of the fence were the hip restaurants and the check-cashing storefronts of the transitioning urban Oakland neighborhood in which Arrowhead found itself, and along one edge, the walls of a large public school with 93.4 percent students of color, more than half of whom were eligible for free lunch. Meanwhile, in 2004 families paid Arrowhead Academy an annual tuition of more than $13,500. Arrowhead was a progressive school with many gay/lesbian, adoptive, and scholarship families, and it was more diverse in racial/ethnic and other terms than Oceanview. Among my sampled families, the average reported income was $186,000, although no family earned less than $60,000, and several "lived off their investments" or earned more than $600,000 annually.

6. The uses of consumer culture for children in Oakland

Briefly, I found that children live in systems of meaning that I dubbed "economies of dignity," and that their days were filled with conversations in which they negotiated and navigated their connections to each other through their common experiences, including of commercial goods like sneakers, GameBoys and movies. Children seemed most preoccupied with being able to participate in the conversation among their peers at school, and to do so, they had to own or have experienced whatever the kids were talking about. These economies of dignity looked very similar to each other across my three fieldsites, even though these varied dramatically by class and racial/ethnic composition. In most of these conversations, children appeared to be desperately concerned with sameness, struggling to avoid the experience of being different, and therefore invisible, unable to participate in the conversation at hand.

7. The economy of dignity

I use the term "the economy of dignity" to mean the discursive system by which children are audible and thus visible to each other (see Pugh, 2009 for a detailed discussion). Relying on mostly unarticulated rules governing their talk, children negotiate the meaning and value of cultural products and personal facts—from electronic gaming systems to whether or not they can turn a cartwheel, from their fathers' occupation or whereabouts to the design of their lunchboxes. Across my fieldsites, these negotiations were very similar in tone and style, and differed markedly, for example, from the explicit put-downs characteristic of the dialogue in the "mean-girl" movie genre. Children almost never confronted each other directly about the value of their contributions, and appeared to focus more on whether or not they could join the conversation about a given item. During one Oceanview recess, for example, a group of girls chorused about how much they all disliked Britney Spears, who was at the time a Disney pop star being marketed to younger listeners. In their joyful disparagement, they were asserting themselves as at once aware of popular music, and as older and savvier than the young kids who comprised the target market. In doing so, of course, they were also asserting distinction, setting symbolic boundaries against those who *did* like Britney Spears. But in the ethnographic moment, with only themselves in attendance, their focus was in forging their own collectivity.

In another example at Arrowhead, two girls talked about their birthday parties, the first girl recounting the complex treasure hunt her mother created, the second girl recalling a birthday soccer game at the indoor commercial site the Bladium. Both refrained from explicit comparison as they recounted their parties to an audience of interested peers, an omission that speaks to the stakes involved—not besting the other, but joining the other. The primary issue was not whose birthday party was cooler, or whose parents loved them more, or even who had more friends or money, but rather, whose birthday party was of the *same* caliber to warrant even talking about it. The surrounding children whose birthday parties were presumably of the more ordinary variety—pizza, games and cake in the park or at home—were silent.

While what counted for the children as worthy of conversation varied from day to day and from fieldsite to fieldsite, for the most part, children made the most hay out of topics that would display their access to popular culture—electronic game systems, collectible cards or toys, as well as particular movies, music or destinations. One day at Sojourner Truth:

> Thelma is there and she brings out her GameBoy Advance. "Whose is that?" I ask. "Mine," she says. "My mother gave it to me, I'm getting some new games for Christmas." "I have a Game Boy," said Curtis. "I have a GameBoy," said Lamont. Marlaine didn't say anything.

These declarative assertions were more typical for their tone and feeling during my years of observation than the fabled "nyah-nyah" in children's peer culture. What are children doing when they are the third or fourth person announcing that they, too, have a GameBoy? Are they working hard to exclude those among them who do not? Certainly at times that was part of the dynamic. In addition, asserting belonging is, of course, the other side of excluding; certainly the flip side of forging bonds with groups to which you want to belong—say, those of us with GameBoys—is often keeping out people who don't. More frequently in my fieldwork, however, children appeared to be reaching to be a part of something, a larger group that they wanted to join.

Scholars have noted that popular culture works to create weak ties, ties that can then turn into more intimate links by casting a wide net of accessible symbols and rituals that many people can understand and deploy (Lizardo, 2006). Children have been found to emphasize the popular and

the fashionable in their group-making processes. In Chee's (2000, p. 33) report on Beijing children's culture, one girl described a scenario in which the token of value was ice cream. "Once a classmate brought a package of New Continent ice cream to school. I said 'I have not seen this kind before.' She said that the [commercial] market had been selling them for a long time; New Continent was the most famous—how could I not know? After school I went and bought one. It was winter and although it tasted good, I was so cold that my teeth were sore."

Yet culture scholars make it seem as though it is easy to gain access to popular culture, as indeed it can be for adults. Children, however, must often negotiate their access to such common cultural forms through their caregivers, and thus we see how the economy of dignity can lead to intense consumer pressure at home (Pugh, 2009). Chee's Beijing study illustrated this issue in the story of a low-income Chinese boy, who had lied when he told classmates that he had already tried some popular ice cream. One day, the boy begged his father to go to Wall's Ice Cream, which at 3.50 yuan was a considerable expense for a family who made 100 yuan a month. But the boy had really wanted it, and it was unusual for him to say so. Apparently, "his classmates had asked him [if he had tried Walls and the boy has said yes and that it had tasted very good.]. The father remarked 'Actually the child had never tried it before. [He was] afraid others would laugh at him. In light of this I had to buy it for the child to taste'" (Chee, 2000, p. 54).

In my fieldwork, the commodifed goods and experiences that mattered in children's economies of dignity were most frequently those that were heavily advertised, testimony to the extent of their exposure to the $15 billion in corporate marketing dollars spent on reaching children annually (Schor, 2004). In fieldnotes of a journey back to Sojourner Truth from a fieldtrip, for example, I reported that the children in my car were excited, gleefully shouting out the name of food chains they recognized, trying to convince me make an unplanned stop in the car so they could all "get some food."

> Driving up Telegraph Avenue all the kids point out stores they know—"Ooohhh, let's stop at Taco Bell, I want to go to Mcdonalds." Simon shouts out in his high, hollow voice: "Does anybody have a GameBoy?" They want to hear music, and I say all I have is Raffi [a Canadian musician who records for the very young] and they all moan loudly "Noooo." "Don't you have any fast one like 'R-e-s-p-e-c-t'?" says Andrea, and she sings it out.

Children generally used shared cultural objects to signify being savvy, popular, older than their years (but not an adult) and not-poor.

This list of principal goals does not include the primary symbolic focus of affluent parents, who often preferred to signal class distinctions more explicitly through their preferences and practices around children's consumer culture, including wooden toys and limited screentime. On an Oceanview fieldtrip to a science museum, for example, the parent chaperones gathered in the lunchroom while the children participated in the program.

> One mother studied her Blackberry for a while, then told us about her older son's experiences at the French-American school, ostensibly to compare the parent involvement at the two schools. "Last year the whole fourth and fifth grades went on a two-week field trip to France, and they told parents don't even try it, don't even try to come." Instead, she said: "they just told us to write a check and we did." The kids lived with French families for two weeks and did chores. "I told my son 'Just make sure you don't go to live in the baker's house,'" she laughed. "He'd be up at 3 a.m., kneading."

While the anecdote highlighted the contrast between what the private school and Oceanview asked of parents, it did so in a way that managed to also display considerable family expenditure

on a two-week school fieldtrip to France. In the same conversation, a mother wished aloud for wooden toys over electronic ones, and another mentioned that her son had recently lost a baseball jersey that had been autographed by a famous professional player. This group conversation had a far more competitive edge than the conversations I witnessed their children having, which were often more about establishing agreement.

8. Children managing inequality

Thus the children were at these sites, spending more and more time in their increasingly important peer cultures, often trying to use consumer culture to connect. This backdrop brings some urgency to our central question: how do children manage those moments when they lacked whatever item or experience their peers were talking about, when they were faced with the stark prospect of being different? I found children engaged in ''facework''—the impression management that involves the presentation of an honorable self—in order to gather dignity in public. Through facework, a term I borrow from Erving Goffman (1967) and expand upon, children worked a certain magic through discourse to bridge their differences.

9. Facework: making your own dignity

As I use it here, facework is an umbrella term referring to a number of different processes that do that cultural work, in both low-income and affluent settings; I found five different kinds. Children would use particular knowledge or skill to transcend their lack of a particular good (bridging labor), they would claim possession they did not have (claiming), they would monitor their peers for unwarranted claims that appeared to be ratcheting up the prevailing standards (patrolling), they would propose an alternative schema as equally valuable (contesting), and they would hide evidence of socially potent differences (concealing). Processes of facework were remarkably similar across class, differing more in detail than in kind.[3]

While space precludes me from elaborating on most of these processes here, we can see how most of these processes are about establishing sameness. Children engaged in bridging labor by knowing all about how to play with the collectible Magic cards without owning any, for example. This is often the strategy of choice for children in families who restrict TV or other forms of popular culture; such children will know the theme song to shows they have never seen, for example, or debate the merits of different kinds of sneakers they do not own.

I observed two low-income immigrant children struggling to resolve the problem of not having a Halloween costume, which can feel mandatory in many elementary schools due to parades, ''costume days'' and other institutional nods to shared children's culture. Their parents, whom I had interviewed, neither believed in Halloween nor had any extra money to pay for its celebration, which—though rational—put their children in the position of having to manage their social world without the near-ubiquitous social currency. The boys ended up claiming that it was not that they did not have Halloween costumes because their parents couldn't afford them. Rather, these eight-year-olds contended, they did indeed have Halloween costumes: they were ''going as people,'' who were, after all, the scariest part of the recent R-rated zombie movie ''Dawn of the Dead.'' These boys were effectively turning their lack of costume into a positive cultural valence, and doing so discursively, by calling upon a symbol of popular culture particularly valuable to these young children as a marker of age and cultural access. Similarly,

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[3] I direct interested readers to the lengthier discussion in Pugh (2009).

children claimed they had things they did not because they wanted to hide the fact they could not legitimately contribute to the conversation otherwise.

But two of these facework processes—contesting and concealing—are particularly relevant for our focus on difference and domination; I elaborate upon them further below.

9.1. Contesting

When children were "contesting," they challenged another child's sense of what was important. We might think that surely this was a moment in which they were asserting (rather than avoiding) difference, distinguishing themselves from one another for the sake of being different. Yet in the (rare) incidents I witnessed, the contesting seemed to be deployed for a different purpose. Children appeared to opt for this as a defensive measure, in which they were striving to establish a claim to being a full citizen of their social world, rather than exerting some form of domination over others.

In one striking example, Marco was trying to draw a "thank you" poster for his parents as part of an assignment. He looked stumped for ideas, and an exceedingly helpful classmate, who was rather a busybody, leaned over and told him "thankful for what you *have.*" Marco looked at her sturdily. He was a recent immigrant, and on my visits to the family home, I observed exactly what he *had:* almost nothing. He and his sisters shared a few toys and an enormous TV, but no bicycle, no GameBoy, none of the equipment that the kids talked about every day. After a moment, he blurted out his response: "I'm thankful for my *ancestors.*"

This exchange was a powerful moment of contestation about what matters: what you have, or the heritage you come from. In this interaction, the two children were invoking perhaps the most meaningful and effective tokens of value at their disposal. "What you have" was highly symbolic for Marco's classmate, a young girl whose family celebrated the day she came back from foster care with presents and feasting. On the other hand, Marco's response was forceful, pulling out his own alternative: a sense of family history and, perhaps, past sacrifices. By countering with an explicit reference to family, Marco implicitly suggests "what you have" is spiritually empty, materialistic, the very opposite of "my ancestors."

Yet, in effectively contesting values, is Marco asserting his difference to establish some sort of domination, or elite status? With this move, Marco is not likely to overturn the emphasis on consumer culture that prevails in his classroom. Nor is he necessarily trying merely to stave off his own domination—his classmate was not saying "what you have" in order to parade how much *she* had in front of him, she was lording her knowledge of how to complete the assignment over him, not her own rather meager load of possessions. Rather it seemed he was pushing back, momentarily, on an economy of dignity that threatened to render him invisible.

Similarly, one day at Arrowhead, two white boys played with Pokémon cards. "How many do you have?" asked one. The other one hazarded a guess: "600? I don't know," he said. "I just bought them, a lot of packs, new, there are two decks. My grandmother gave me $500 for my birthday, now I have $40." The other boy stopped and looked at him for a moment. "I'm saving my money for college," he says. Like Marco, I would argue that this other little boy is not attempting domination with his remark, which was delivered in a low-key manner and not revisited. Rather he was trying, fleetingly, to posit another frame of reference, an alternative to the overwhelming image of 600 Pokémon cards that would allow him to claim his own dignity in the moment as someone who plans for the (college-educated) future. On rare occasions such as these, children used contestation as they might a life buoy, something to grab onto when their

momentary deprivation forced them to have to defend themselves against the tidal wave of consumer culture.

9.2. Concealing

''Concealing'' was the other form of facework particularly relevant for this discussion, because it challenges the view of consumer culture as a bridge to others. Some children engaged in their own sort of ''shame work'' to conceal from disapproving others (Thorne, 2005). We might expect this particularly among poor children, who conceivably feel shame over their difficult economic conditions.

Yet my fieldwork suggests otherwise. One day, for example, I observed the head teacher at Sojourner Truth, Ms. Graham, preparing to bring the kids on a field trip. There were kids who brought a bag lunch; for those who didn't do so, she was putting together plastic bags filled with a sandwich on white bread, a nectarine, and a drink. At one point while she is putting those together, she asked: ''who didn't bring a lunch?'' Ms. Graham's question, in the context of American schools, is a charged one, in that she was asking who among these children qualified for free lunch, a well-known poverty measure. In other contexts, children regarded actions that made them look like they might have qualified for free lunch with shame or fear—one older sibling of a Sojourner Truth child, who attended a mixed-income middle school, refused to let her parents even fill out the form. But none of the kids at Sojourner Truth reacted to Ms. Graham's inquiry, either by hiding their own response or by craning their necks to see how others responded. On another day, I observed a birthday girl excited about her upcoming celebration.

> When Aleta's mother came to pick her up, Loretta came bounding up excitedly, and spoke directly to her, not to Aleta. ''I am going to have a party and I want Aleta to come, we're going to get our nails done, can Aleta get her nails done?'' Aleta's mother smiles but holds onto Loretta's hand, splayed out, ''well, you aren't going to have nail polish, right, just clear stuff, right?'' Then Loretta added that her mother had said she had enough money to pay for Loretta on her birthday but not for the other girls, so could Aleta come and get her nails done with them, and could Aleta's mother pay for that? Aleta's mother did not respond with distaste, disappointment, or even surprise, and instead said "Okay." Loretta leaped up to Aleta and said you can get the clear stuff, just not the color, she said.

In this fieldsite, all the children were poor, and in this homogeneous environment, they did not hide signs of their own poverty.

Instead, thinking about what kids conceal tells us a little more about the fear of difference that prevails. At Sojourner Truth, instead of poverty, they worked to cover any evidence that they or their families were unusual or ''in trouble.'' Such a concept did not necessarily apply to incarceration, which was not rare in this population, and indeed was the subject of a lengthy conversation one day, when one young girl passed around to all of us at her homework table the card that her father had sent her from ''the Big House.'' But on another day, when Loretta was absent, I asked her sister Yvette where she was. Yvette did not answer, but Fia, who was nearby, took up the question, only with a jeering tone. ''Yeah, where?'' she said, and Yvette said ''shut up, you,'' as if Fia knew better and was harassing her. Fia may indeed have been doing so, for Yvette then told me, clearly embarrassed: ''She went to therapy.'' Children there also worked to conceal that they knew a second language, apparently embarrassed that their families were that freshly arrived in country. I occasionally observed mothers addressing their children in Spanish or the African language of Dinka, while their children responded in diffident mutters.

Concealing also happened in affluent contexts. One affluent white Arrowhead father told me his sons Dean and Max played on a travel soccer team with many Latinos from more constrained backgrounds.

> [My kids] play soccer, it's the one place where we just sort of splurge and buy them expensive shoes. Dean said to me the other day—Because they play soccer and they play year round and they are on their feet all the time!—and this is so typical of him, Dean said to me, ''you know, Dad, next time I get soccer shoes, I don't want to get an expensive pair of shoes, I just want to get a basic pair of shoes.'' You know they play with a lot of kids from socioeconomic disadvantaged backgrounds and they don't have a lot of that stuff.

If what was at stake was simply Dean's status in a game of competitive advantage and ranking, then surely the most expensive shoes would have had particular appeal. Dean's father interpreted Dean's request not to buy the expensive shoes as his laudable effort to avoid making his teammates feel bad, which was certainly possible. At the same time, however, sometimes having the perfect equipment looked foolish, over-prepared, coddled, or snobbish. Whatever his reasoning, Dean was looking less for visibility with this plea, I think, than for the welcome connection of sameness. In contrast to cases of ''contesting,'' with which children fought back against invisibility by asserting momentary difference, ''concealing'' involved moments in which children fought back against (negative, differentiating) visibility by asserting momentary sameness.

Collins' (2004a) work on interaction ritual chains offers some important insights into how we might explain the similar uses of consumer culture as a social bridge, even in contexts of vastly different group styles, of emotional landscapes. Collins would consider the children's conversations reported here as ''status rituals,'' defining status as he does in the restricted sense of inclusion, much as I mean dignity here (see Collins, 2004a, Chapter 1, fn. 8). Like Goffman, Collins emphasizes the situation rather than the actors within it, and he views rituals through the lens of what they contribute to a group—a ''successful'' one generates social solidarity, he contends. His confessedly diffuse central concept also makes it hard to imagine what would not qualify as a ''ritual.'' Yet, applying his typology, children's schools generally involve high density and little ''diversity,'' or, as he means the term, little changeover in the cast of characters. These traits encourage situations of high conformity, as well as strong attachment to ''reified symbols,'' in this case, to established forms of scrip such as GameBoys. Historically these kinds of contexts are also increasingly the daily environment for more children, and for more years of their lives (Hofferth, 1996). Thus Collins enables us to understand why children might be more concerned with ''keeping up with the Joneses'' rather than being ''different from the Joneses''— due to the specific characteristics of schools, dense social worlds featuring the same people day after day (see also Collins, 2004a, Chapter 1, fn. 13).

10. Discussion and conclusion

My title asks us to look at three different uses of consumer culture—as distinction, boundaries and bridges. In some ways, I found examples of all three. Following Bourdieu, Douglas Holt argues that people of all classes may consume the same things, but sort themselves into hierarchies of taste and distinction in *how* they consume them (Berhau, 2000; Holt, 1997). I certainly found this to be true in the case of GameBoys, which were near-universal among eight-year-old boys, but whose play was managed very tightly or not at all by their parents depending on class. Lamont and others track the symbolic boundaries people draw against one another; in

other data (not presented here), I found parents certainly called upon moral language to differentiate themselves from materialistic neighbors (on the part of the rich) or those unable to care adequately for their children (on the part of the poor) (Pugh, 2009). But these apparent discursive goals of exclusion, distinction, difference—these were primarily the goals of the *parents* in my research, and if I restricted my study to interviews with adults, that is what I would have found.

My ethnographic data with children, however, revealed that they sometimes use consumer culture more for joining a peer or a group rather than distinguishing themselves from others. My research demonstrated that children use talk of movies, GameBoys, parties and vacation often to connect rather than to distance themselves, to establish sameness rather than distinction, to belong rather than to get ahead. Children develop and use their cultural fluency in the parlance and practices embedded in popular consumer goods, and through facework, they try to surmount the social challenges posed by uneven ownership.

Contemporary debates in culture do not worry much about this behavior, focusing more on outlining the ways in which culture is (still) a tool of domination. Ultimately, my intention here is not to propose a more voluntarist cultural sociology, but to urge scholars to question explicitly what has been of late implicit and assumed, that is, to attend more fully to interests as culturally derived and sanctioned, and to explore the varied cultural circumstances under which they are forged. Yet while my own research demonstrates the occasional primacy of connection, inequality is still central to this story. Indeed, overlapping tastes make the teeth of inequality bite more fiercely, as those who do without struggle to manage the experience of cultural deprivation, and the social distance that it augurs.

Indeed, emotions run through these cultural phenomena as through a dense network of capillaries. Identities—even as expressed through tastes—are not solely cognitive experiences, I suggest. The acts—for parents as well as children—of having, of doing, of buying, of making meaning and of forging identities in groups and in relationships, all of these experiences are rife with passion and yearning. These emotions figure strongly in the processes at work here, in the relationships among children. Why does it matter that we address the emotional? Not least because it enables us to destabilize the notion of the rational autonomous actor underlying much theoretical work. Children's consumer desires are not just embedded in their rational calculation to come out on top, but in the relational dynamics of care and empathy, the pull of belonging, the fear of difference.

This research also suggests that the process of what some scholars consider ''socialization'' is clearly far from seamless. Parents and children, particularly among the affluent, routinely disagreed about what children should have; children often cared more about signaling age, gender or access to popular culture than they did about showing taste parents considered appropriate to their class. In this study, children were so anxious about being different that they frequently asserted and cultivated their similarities in consumer tastes. Only when they were ''contesting'' forms of scrip were they establishing difference, and then, I argue, in service more to visibility than to domination. In essence children demonstrated social behavior that the works of Bourdieu, and others in the symbolic exclusion tradition, theorize only glancingly (Pugh, submitted for publication). By eschewing distinctions that their adults continually made, children did not seem to share the same perspective on the uses of consumer culture.

It is not that adults are busy competing and differentiating themselves, however, while children, in all their innocence, just want to belong; I am not arguing for a simple idealization of children here. It is possible that children are learning how to connect to others, and they do so using obvious markers first, so that they want near-total sameness, while adults want difference

within certain parameters. As Simmel ([1904] 1957) outlined a century ago, adults tack back and forth from difference to sameness in a subtler bid for connection and individuality. Similar results have been found with regard to gender—young children use the most extreme gender signaling at first before they master the more sophisticated cues of adult culture (Seiter, 1993).

In addition, however, the way children's lives are organized is a likely contributing factor. Most young children spend most of their days in schools or in organized daycare, in which they have repeated interactions with the same group of people day after day (Hernandez, 1995; Hofferth, 1996). Extending Collins' work, we know these environments serve to focus attention on a sort of bonding social capital, on achieving solidarity based on shared group styles, practices and tokens, that these children reflect (Collins, 2004a). My evidence suggests these contexts elicit and enable the cultural meanings that emphasize connection.

My findings contrast with the storied triumph and despair of the acute competition over consumer goods among youths in high school or middle school (Bettie, 2003; Milner, 2004). Further research can help to determine why children can work to use culture to connect in one venue and to differentiate in another. Given that, as we know, connecting to one group could be a form of differentiating from another group—perhaps as children get older, the emphasis changes from the former to the latter. I am disinclined to see this shift as a simple expression of developmental age, however; scholars need not leap too quickly to such an asociological view of children, when, as James and Prout (1997, p. 7) argued, ''the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life, but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture'' (see also Thorne, 1987). Before we conclude these differences are simple artifacts of ages and stages, we need more attention to the kinds of groups and settings that shape the uses to which people put culture, and reshuffle the primacy of difference over connection.

Acknowledgements

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