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'Consuming children' : a sociological analysis of children's relationship with contemporary consumer culture

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**‘Consuming Children’: A Sociological Analysis of Children’s Relationship with
Contemporary Consumer Culture**

by

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in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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Abstract

‘Consuming Children’: A sociological analysis of children’s relationship with contemporary consumer culture

The aim of this thesis is to identify and understand children’s relationships with the world of consumption. Through the children’s own narratives a picture emerges of the mediating properties of consumer goods in their wider social and personal friendships. Living in what could be described as a materially divided society this project explores how children make sense of those inequalities and what their experiences are in understanding their own socio-economic position compared to others and how it impacts on their relationships to consumer culture. A particular concern is that such relationships may be more complicated than they seem on the surface and that class has an especially significant impact on children’s experience of consumption. The contention here is that the impact of material inequality on an individual’s capacity to consume is in the context of the sociology of both consumption and childhood remains largely under-explored. Creative child-centred data collection methods were therefore used in order to prioritise children’s ‘voices’ as a means of understanding the impact of consumption on their lives. This data was further complemented by interviews with parents and in this context parents’ management of familial household budgets emerged as having a particularly important influence in determining the role of consumption as a resource in the dynamic that exists between children, their parents and friendship groups. The evidence collected here suggests that the role of consumer goods is central to children’s participation in what passes for a ‘normal’ life in contemporary consumer society. Both the children and their parents are acutely aware of this and as such go to inordinate lengths to ensure their children are able to have the appropriate signifiers of inclusion in their peer group networks. Material possessions appear to provide a currency with which children trade, whilst offering them inclusion within their wider personal and social networks. This research has given ‘consuming children’ a forum within which they can articulate what role consumer goods occupy in their lives on a day-to-day basis and what it means to children if they are unable to participate fully in the society in which they live.

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Author's Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

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Signed Julie Evers.....

Date 01/09/02.....

Conferences

2002 Co –Chair Round Table University of Plymouth Discourse Power and Resistance Conference. Graduate School Faculty of Arts and Education. Paper presented: ‘The Arty’s versus the Academics: Discourse, Power and Resistance in Post 16 Education.’

2001 BSA Annual Conference, Manchester Metropolitan University
Paper presented: ‘To have or not to have: a familial odyssey into the world of consumption’.

2001 Attendance at BSA Consumption study day ‘Consumption and the Lifecourse’
University of Durham.

2000: BSA Annual Conference, University of York including attendance at the BSA
Study Group on Consumption.

1999: Attendance at BSA Annual Conference University of Glasgow.

1999: Attended Mind the Gap: Changing boundaries of childhood Conference,
University of Leicester.

1999 Presented a paper at the 1st International Conference on Consumption and
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Children as Consumers: A Psychological Analysis of the Young People’s Market.
Authors: Barrie Gunter and Adrian Furnham.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Over the last century a plethora of books, articles and journals have emerged within the sociological literature on consumption and consumerism in the modern or so-called 'postmodern' world. A great deal of attention has been paid to the roles of consumption as both an economic base for western societies and as a means by which individuals make statements about where they place themselves within the social order. That attention however, has focused principally on adult roles and their relationship to contemporary consumer culture. As the literature has evolved gaps have inevitably emerged where significant research questions have either not been addressed or further questions have been raised by the empirical work undertaken. This research will attempt to answer some of those questions and to begin to fill a part of the gap that exists in the sociology of consumption literature, namely, what role consumption plays in childrens everyday lived experiences.

Children's relationship (as opposed to youth), to consumer culture is an area of the social world that still remains in its infancy (Buckingham, 2000). Originally studied within the nexus of the family, children living in contemporary western societies have now been identified as a powerful agent of leverage on parents shopping activities (McNeal, 1992; 1998, Gunter and Furnham 1998). Additionally children are seen as having sizeable amounts of income of their own to spend on consumer goods. The marketing companies and the advertisers are acutely aware of this last point. In terms of understanding children's motivations and aspirations in relation to their shopping

habits marketers are way ahead of both sociologists and psychologists in understanding this multi-faceted and often complex aspect of young children's lives. This research intends to fill a small part of the gap that currently exists by identifying what the main issues are for children in their aspiration for material possessions. The major influences on their choice of goods, what meanings they attach to consumer goods and the importance of owning particular signifiers of consumer culture within their peer group networks are areas that will all be discussed and explored in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Familial household budgets are not necessarily evenly distributed within households and definitely not between households. Arguably levels of inequality and in particular child poverty levels have tripled over the last three decades (Gregg *et al.* 1998). Yet, on the surface there seems to be no abating of the levels of material possessions children own. How then, do families who do not have the same level of income and resources to commit to the purchase of children's material possessions allocate those resources and what are the motivations behind parents' expenditure on particular consumer items? Equally what the sociology of consumption literature appears to lack is an understanding of what it means to be a child living and experiencing issues of material inequality in a consumer based society. The changing nature of childhood over recent decades has left many adults and social commentators in a state of flux with many advocating the death of childhood (Postman, 1982; Moore 2001). The obituaries that are written tend to lament the end of an era or a particular type of childhood that, if we were to delve deeply enough, was probably only available for a proportion of children in the first place. However, social changes have occurred which have impacted on our understanding of the period in the lifecourse traditionally

known as childhood. One such change has been the increasing role that consumerism and consumer goods have come to play in our lives. Children as a social group have been heavily affected by these changes. The pervasiveness of the media, the increase of targeted advertising at children's needs through foods, leisure, clothing, music, toys, books have all resulted in a much more child-focused market place. This shift in how adults view these changes and how children themselves engage with markets that have been created specifically for them has been virtually uncharted territory within both sociological theory and research.

The reasoning behind the various purchases that children make and how parents themselves view this aspect of their children's lives is a major focus of the research. The children in this study are of a young age (7-11) and as such, there is a need to talk with parents, as they will often be making the 'ultimate' purchase or providing the money for children to make the purchase themselves. To assess the familial dynamics of household budgeting and how parents manage the practicalities of providing children with the consumer goods that they want, for example, at Christmas and Birthdays is also an area of contemporary family life that has been explored within the research.

In Chapter 2 I will outline two significant eras in the evolution of the consumer, the first of which is industrialism and the opening up of the market to the masses. The second era that is seen to be of significance to this research is the latter part of the twentieth century. Bocoock (1992) identifies this era as a time where arguably branded products and niche marketing of consumer goods and services became the conduit for the construction of individual identities. I will also be exploring the debate that

surrounds the concept of identity and how this has been seen to be integral to the individual's relationship to the world of consumption. This chapter will also discuss the meaning of material possessions to individuals and to reflect on Dittmar's suggestion that "the social sciences have taken time to recognise the significance of material objects and have been even slower in starting to examine the relationship between people and their things" (1992:65). The communicative aspect of material possessions within their peer group relationships is therefore central to this study.

Chapter 3 will argue that an individual's access to resources and the increased levels of inequality over the last three decades (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1995; Harvey 2001) is central to the consumption debate and has not been superseded by issues of identities. The suggestion in this chapter is that increased levels of material possessions over recent decades, due to the relative improvement of the standard of living is masking inequalities that lie beneath the surface. I will also be discussing why Bourdieu's focus on cultural capital may be a useful method of looking at intraclass differences in the use of and meanings attached to both consumer and leisure goods and services. Bauman's (1998) work on what it means to be poor and living in a consumer society will also be explored in this chapter.

The specific focus in Chapter 4 will be on children's relationship to consumer culture and will chart where the concept of childhood has been historically and how it is constructed today. Fragmenting family structures have over the last century arguably resulted in different childhoods, as well as wider political and social policies affecting both the education of young people and the structures in place to support families and children living in Britain. The political ideologies that have supported the familial

changes and inequalities that we have experienced over the last three decades will be discussed as will the idea that in certain social groups parents have become ‘cash-rich but time poor’ (Rice, 2000). This chapter will also explore what influence social class has in shaping children’s experience of a notion of childhood and how this relates to their roles as consumers.

Looking at children’s increasing media literacy (Buckingham 2000), the centrality of the media in children’s and young people’s lives combined with the pervasive medium of advertising are discourses that will also be outlined in Chapter 4. One such advertising phenomena is the concept of a market known as the ‘tweenies’ who are primarily 8-12 year-old children whose identity and positioning has generally evolved because of their consumer lifestyles and interaction with the world of contemporary consumer culture. The suggestion is that, perhaps the micro aspects of consumption are driving the macro social changes that we are experiencing in relation to children not only getting older younger, but in their increased awareness and engagement with the marketplace.

Methodological issues of doing research with young children and the ethical dilemmas that ensue from design right through to completion of the project will be dealt with in Chapter 5. The need to gain different sorts of data from the children has meant that I have tried to incorporate creative methods which are equipped to understand differing aspects of their childhood’s in relation to class, gender and consumption. Given the complexities inherent in working with a population of young children imaginative research methods were adopted to ensure the research would

gather the data required whilst being both meaningful and engaging to the children in the process.

All the data generated from both the children and the parents will be described in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively. In Chapter 6 the main themes that emerged as key issues and responses to the research questions will be classified and grouped thematically. Focusing generally on which material possessions are important to children, what functions they serve, what influences them to want certain items and the strategies they adopt to acquire consumer goods. Chapter 7 focuses on how the parents viewed their children's relationships with consumer culture. Parents concerns focused heavily on the wider social changes that they felt have occurred over the last twenty years. For example, the levels of peer pressure parents' considered children to be under now compared to their own childhood had increased significantly. Influences on their children's requests for certain items were seen to be due to peer group culture and advertising. Parents own experiences of childhood in relation to consumption was a big factor in how they wanted their children to experience their childhoods.

Overall then, this project aims to offer children a forum within which they can narrate their experiences of living in a consumer based society and will then be located and discussed within a wider sociological framework. This research will try to gain an understanding as to why children aspire to particular material possessions and with what meaning those possessions are subsequently endowed. Additionally the research will try to address the social and cultural dimensions of consumption in children's lives specifically looking at the effects that social class differences may or may not have on the process.

To summarise, this thesis aims to offer an empirically grounded assessment of the relationship between contemporary notions of childhood, class, consumption and identities for children and their parents living in two areas in a South West city which have very different socio-economic profiles. The main aim of targeting two areas was to highlight how socio-economic differences and issues of inequality impact on children's experiences to the consumption process. Such an approach aims to provide an antidote to overly rhetorical approaches to consumer society. It will also reinforce the fact that consumer lifestyles are often an expression of changing class dynamics and that the freedom to consume is much more complex and contradictory than it might appear on the surface.

Chapter 2

Consumption and Identity

“Historians looking back at the twentieth century may well conclude that it was the century of the consumer society...what has undoubtedly had the most significant impact upon the way of life of ordinary people in industrial societies over the last century has been the mass availability of consumer goods.

(Lee, 2000:ix)

When we consider the pervasive nature of ‘consumerism’ in our everyday lives as we leave one century behind us and embark on the next it is hard to believe the extent of the huge and significant shifts that have occurred in the last 100 years and to be more precise in the latter half of the 20th century. Contemporary social theory has focused very sharply on how we make sense of the role of the ‘consumer’ and to what extent consumption has replaced (or at least complemented) production as the central framework within which we attempt to understand our relationship to wider social structures (Campbell 1995). Crompton (1996) goes further when she suggests that “consumption processes have become *more* important than production or class processes in shaping social identities and explaining social behaviour” (p.113). Whatever the complexities of the debates that surround consumption what we can be sure of, as Corrigan (1997) argues, is that consumption has firmly established itself as a foundational as opposed to an epiphenomenal characteristic of contemporary society.

This chapter will look at two distinct historical eras that are seen to be directly relevant to the research questions underpinning this project. It will also discuss whether the meanings attached to material possessions by individuals are simply about symbolism and status differentiation or whether the meanings and significance attached to consumer goods by individuals have other implications in the individual's wider personal and social networks. The aim of this chapter will also be to look at whether consumption is a mediating influence in the formation of social and personal identities. The suggestion is that over the last decade the sociological literature has become somewhat preoccupied with the concept of identity which has been to the detriment of exploring material inequality and access to resources in the consumption arena. There appeared to be a shift in the literature from the 1980s onwards whereby sociologists focused on consumption as an increasingly important source of identity (McCracken 1988; Miller 1987; Lury 1996; Miles 1998). However, due to the lack of empirical work in this area, the status of the relationship between consumption and identity remains uncertain. This study will try to address part of the gap that exists in the literature by examining the links between social class, consumption and identity in the context of childhood.

Consumption for all?

To enable us to make sense of how the process of consumption has evolved over time it would be useful to just locate some of the debates surrounding consumption within a socio-historical framework. Within the sociology of consumption literature there are, arguably two distinct eras that are of direct relevance to the argument set out in this thesis. From a socio-historical perspective the opening up of the market to mass

consumption within the industrial era is of particular significance. Although it is acknowledged that the opening up of the market was something that evolved over time, consumption was no longer a pursuit purely of the aristocracy and the elite (McCracken 1988). The second era that had a major impact was in the post- second-world war period in the latter half of the twentieth century. This era resulted in huge social shifts in the way that consumer goods aimed at satisfying individual personal needs were marketed and positioned. Towards the end of this period arguably people could buy, through consumer goods, a particular lifestyle or construct a particular identity or set of identities (Bocock, 1993).

Generally speaking mass consumption has been seen as a simultaneous process which accompanied the rise of industrialism (Campbell, 1987). We must, however, be cautious for two reasons when linking the advent of a consumer based society to the industrial period. Firstly, there was according to McCracken (1988) evidence of a consumer boom as early as the last quarter of the sixteenth century. The second reason that we need to be guarded when talking of a consumer boom aligns with the point that Bocock (1993) makes regarding whom this consumer era actually affected. Although there was evidence of a consumer society beginning to emerge for the masses, consumption was about getting basic physiological needs met through commodities such as food, clothing and primary household items. The social groups that would have engaged with what is defined in the literature as early consumer culture would have been the aristocracy and the upper classes. Trying to locate a specific period of time that is identifiable in terms of macro social change linked to a consumer economy is not straightforward. Edwards (2000) sums up the dilemmas of the early historical debate that authors such as McCracken (1988), McKendrick et al

(1987) and Campbell (1983) have tried to outline surrounding the turning point for the development of the consumer society by saying that,

“What we are presented with is a complex picture of interplay of politics, economics, social condition and attitudes as central in the development and formation of consumer society.”

(Edwards, 2000:35).

Alternatively we could take Edwards statement to mean that it is the political, economic, social or attitudinal measure that is used which dictates how the evolution of a consumer society is defined.

For the purpose of this research however, the rise of the consumer society is seen as having two significant phases the first being the industrialisation era which is a period when, as McCracken (1988) suggests, consumerism was firmly embedded in all our lives. The rise of economic prosperity which heralded the start of mass consumption in its earliest form is also summed up by McKendrick *et al.* (1987) who suggest that “the consumer revolution was the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution” (p.9). The second notable era is the middle part of the twentieth century onwards whereby, possessions started to become a channel for the representations of identity through the branding and lifestyling of products (Bocock, 1993).

The development of industrialism brought about changes to the social patterning of many people’s lives, such as changes in the economic structure through the growth of capitalist methods of production and the creation of markets for the ever increasing production of commodities (Bocock, 1992). According to Bocock these changes affected not only the way that people worked but also brought about a cultural turn in the concept of the commodity. Marketers sought new means of engaging people to

buy the products that factories were producing. Concomitant to this growth was arguably the shift where employees (producers) also became consumers on a mass scale and were through their labour power, themselves, being commodified. Edwards (2000) argues that the worker becomes alienated from their labour power and then ultimately in her/his role as a consumer they then become complicit through their own false consciousness to a life of insatiable needs. Marx suggested that the workers themselves become commodified to the extent that, “the workers existence is thus brought under the same condition of every other commodity.” (1844/1981:17)

If Marx talked of the alienation of the worker through the labour process and ultimately the commodification of that worker, for Durkheim (1893/1984) industrialism was about the emergence of anomie through the forced or abnormal division of labour (Craib, 1997). According to Durkheim people were forced into life positions that might not have best suited their individual needs. In pre-modern societies economic scarcity was also juxtaposed with social regulation which limited human wants and needs. The growth of industrialism arguably fuelled the insatiability of human desires (Slater, 1997). Industrialism was developing at a more rapid pace than individuals could cope with and economic progression could only advance at the expense of social regulation (Waters, 1994). If we consider the pace of change social actors have experienced over the last half of the twentieth century, perhaps it could be argued that consumption and consumer goods help to fill people’s anomic lives offering individuals a meaning in their everyday lives. The meaning attached to their possessions may enable individuals to make sense of their existence and their wider social lives. This is one of the issues that this thesis will seek to address when trying to identify the rationale for why children seek to acquire the goods that they do as

well as exploring the meanings that are embedded in contemporary forms of consumption.

Consumption and the individual

Having established the creation of the markets and the cultural shift in the concept of the commodity I now want to sketch out the relationship between the individual and the world of material possessions. The work of Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel are seen to be useful within this project as they were seminal in offering an explanation of the relationships between the individual, social class, identity and consumption. It could also be argued that both Veblen and Simmel's work is still useful to any meaningful discussion surrounding social class differences and consumption in contemporary society. Both these authors saw consumption as a process through which social status and rank are established and communicated by individuals through consumer goods (Gabriel and Lang, 1995).

Simmel (1904) was one of the first social writers to suggest that there was a homology between the human subject and the object of a commodity. Simmel for example, wrote about the emergence of a distinct urban culture in late nineteenth century Berlin, which was directly linked to consumption. Simmel saw the emergence of the city and the ensuing social life that grew out of city life as being the key to understanding the social shifts that were occurring at the time. According to Edwards (2000) this period became a time of social and psychological struggle with the need for the mind to have to process more and more information. Simmel's work suggests that consumption is the main arena where such struggles are played out. The tensions between the individual and society are illustrated in Simmel's (1904) analysis of the

'trickle down theory' of fashion (Corrigan, 1997). Fashion for Simmel fulfilled both aspects of inclusion and exclusion, individuals used fashion as a means of imitating or distancing themselves from other individuals. Different class groups used fashion to mark out their own class position and identities. Hence we find working class groups imitating higher social class groups. Consequently upper class groups then have to reassert their dominance by distancing themselves from the working classes with different signifiers of fashion suggested by Simmel to be a 'trickle down' process. This process is highly reminiscent of the growth of children's material culture whereby each year there is an 'in toy' that parents from all social class groups try to obtain only for it to be discarded as soon as that item becomes passé (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). In summary then Simmel, according to Miles, offers us the idea that individuals are constantly trying to juggle a sense of "individuality with the security of commonality with others" (1998:20). It is this very dilemma that drives most of the contemporary sociological consumption literature in looking for the relationships between individuals, peer cultures and consumer goods.

Trying to understand children's relationship to the world of consumption is a relatively new area within both the sociology of consumption and childhood literature. Additionally how children use material possessions in their wider social and personal networks is an area that we also know very little about. Equally whether parents wish to socially differentiate their children on the basis of what they own or what activities they pursue are some of the questions that require further discussion and reflection. As Dittmar suggests "gender, class and status are clearly marked by material possessions...consumer goods reproduce and maintain social categories" (1992:70).

Social status and the differentiation of individuals through consumer goods was an area of the literature that Thorstein Veblen focused on at the end of the nineteenth century. Veblen (1899) studied the nouveaux riches of the late nineteenth century who were aspiring to the signifiers of upper class wealth and lifestyle and whose consumption patterns were linked to social differentiation. Veblen offered a theory of what was to become known as the 'leisure class.' Individuals were esteemed in relation to their wealth and inherited wealth had a higher status than earned wealth. Conspicuous leisure as opposed to the earlier puritanical Calvinist attitudes of frugality, was seen as the most efficient way for an individual to demonstrate wealth and consequently claim higher status (Corrigan 1997). Veblen further differentiates consumption into what he terms conspicuous and vicarious consumption. Conspicuous consumption was aimed at the newly emerging middle classes who in order to imitate the upper classes used consumer goods as a means of demonstrating their status and their belonging to a certain social group as well as expressing a visible exemption from productive labour (Slater 1997). In this study Veblen also analysed the role of women in the leisure class. Women in their role as homemakers were key to the consumption process in so far as they beautified their homes whilst keeping up with trends in food, fashion and furniture. One of the contentions I want to address in this thesis is that it could now be argued that as we have shifted in to a consumer driven society and as relative standards of living have improved, at least for some, just as women were once the vicarious consumers on behalf of men, children now fill that role but on behalf of their parents.

What Veblen and Simmel were able to do was to place consumption at the heart of social theorising and to lay the foundations for the argument that consumption and consumer goods provide a system of communication between social groups (Gabriel

and Lang, 1995). The importance of how different social class groups who use material possessions as a means of social differentiation has often been lost in negative discussions surrounding excessive consumption (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). The aim of this study is to place consumption at the centre of the project, if as Gabriel and Lang suggest that “goods tell stories [and] stories resonate with symbolism and express meanings” (1995:66). It is those ‘stories’ which this research is intended to address: how, why and what messages consumer goods communicate to individuals and groups and whether those messages are class, gender, age or ethnicity based. As Lunt and Livingstone suggest “the family provides a powerful context for the consumption desires, decisions and practices of its members”(1992:76).

To summarise the historical progression of consumption, the sociological literature of the first half of the twentieth century focused on the individual’s relationship to production, which ultimately was the main determinant of their life chances. Increasingly as production in its traditional sense i.e. Fordist mass produced goods declined and the advent of niche marketing started to evolve so the focus of the literature started to shift towards trying to understand the relationship between social actors and the consumption process. Featherstone (1991) suggests that at the turn of the century Fordism necessitated the construction of new markets and facilitated the education of the public to become consumers through advertising and the media. Some working class groups were able to purchase luxury goods for the first time as well as meeting their basic economic needs. If Fordism lit the fuse that ignited mass consumption in America in the 1930s, for Britain it was not until the period after the Second World War when Britain experienced a similar shift. Unemployment levels were very low and the manufacturing industries began to boom as did wage levels in

certain skilled occupations, this then heralded a new era in Britain's consumption cartography (Bocock, 1993). What this period started to highlight was the opening up of the divisions and levels of inequalities between different social class groups into the polarised extremes at the top and the bottom of the socio-economic scale that many people are currently experiencing (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998).

Lasch (1991) suggests that towards the end of the twentieth century the mass production of commodities demanded a mass market to absorb them. The shift in to a mass-consumption economy, which had begun in the earlier part of that century but by now had according to Lasch, firmly made the work ethic obsolete for workers. 'Labour' as a moral obligation by now became a means to an end for the worker to partake of the fruits of consumption (Lasch, 1991:73). Distinctive labour market changes linked to the individualism based ideology of capitalism when juxtaposed with the Thatcherite eighties moved sociologists to focus away from an individual's social class position and their relationship to consumption. External variables such as age, race, class, gender and ethnicity were now seen to be less relevant to people's everyday lives (Bocock 1993). Internal dynamics such as the construction of an identity through the use of consumer goods became central to sociological debate (Giddens, 1991; Kellner, 1992). Consumer goods according to Kellner (1992) are part of the way in which people construct a sense of who they are and a sense of their identity and it is the link between consumption, identity and meanings of material possessions that will be explored in the next section.

Identity or meaning?

“Identity is Rome to which all discussions
of modern Western consumption lead.”

(Gabriel and Lang, 1995:81)

The second historical period that is relevant to this research project is the middle part of the twentieth century, post-war through to the 1980s. This latter era saw a shift from the basic material provision through consumption to one of status value and symbolic meaning of commodities. The 1950s for example saw the emergence of new products aimed at the youth market and the start of the age-grading of goods and services to appeal to a differentiating market (Willis, 1990). This period also saw material possessions becoming a conduit for the representation of identity (Bocock, 1992; Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Crucially, as Bocock points out, consumption became embedded in social processes and began to be used as a means of making and maintaining distinctions and more importantly establishing boundaries between groups. This period also represented a huge turning point in terms of how consumer goods became positioned. This was the beginning of goods being targeted at particular groups, which resulted in the highly differentiated markets that have evolved since. Juxtaposed to this was the proliferation of visual images in people's homes across all social groups through television programmes, video production and advertising (Gabriel and Lang 1995). This advancement in visual technology enabled the 'viewer' (or consumer) to interact with the available images. This interaction set individuals up as agents who through consumer goods could on the surface construct a lifestyle and an identity of their choosing. The difficulty, however, that many people are faced with in their everyday lives is whether or not they genuinely have the

choice to *choose* a lifestyle or identity? If you are living on subsistence levels and are dependent on state benefits for example, can you still construct an identity or a lifestyle? How do those images that we interact with via the media and television screens affect people's lives in different class contexts? Is there, for example, such a thing as satisfaction in a media saturated world, when most forms of advertising are based on appealing to our dissatisfaction of the lives that we lead? This research will seek to address how children interact with both advertising and the media, offering an insight into the ways in which children deconstruct and understand the messages and the meanings that are conveyed through material goods.

Having discussed how the consumer society has evolved I now want to shift the focus of the discussion onto the issue of identity and why it has become so central to both sociology as a discipline and more specifically to the consumption literature. There are inherent difficulties in trying to operationalise a concept such as identity, not least because it is often used with little or no definition and as such there are no tangible features that are easily tested within the research arena. These difficulties are compounded even further when trying to link children and identity issues together. Children may have 'fixed' elements of their identity such as their name, family of origin or perhaps where they live, but the more fluid aspects of who they are and how they try to express aspects of a 'self' is subject to parental and other adult authority control. Within this study the aim is to identify the meanings that material possessions are endowed with by children and to assess whether that can tell us anything about the relationship between material possessions and children's developing sense of self. Firstly, however, I want to try and establish a definition of identity and to look at how

identity and the relationships between identity and consumer goods has been dealt with in both the sociology and the consumption literature thus far.

The term identity is used in many different ways and all too often without explanation about what it might constitute in relation to the argument being proposed. It seems that the term identity is often interchanged with other terms such as social identity, personal identity, the 'self', group identity, and belonging. The elusiveness of establishing a universal definition of the concept of identity in the literature leads me to start from Gabriel and Lang's (1995) concept of using the term initially as something translated from its Latin origins meaning sameness, continuity and distinctiveness cutting across material objects as well as humans. A note of caution however, is that just like the debate itself I see the term as being fluid and changing rather than having a fixed definition. There are, it seems, many definitions rather than just one to the concept of identity.

Over the last decade many theorists have looked at social and personal identity and between them have offered differing views about how social actors define both their individual and group identities (Giddens, 1991; Jenkins, 1996; Erikson, 1963; Dittmar, 1992; Billington et al 1998; Gabriel & Lang, 1995; Woodward, 1997; Hall, 1997 and Miller, 1998). I will be looking at each of these throughout this section but first I want to start with Giddens (1991) book *'Modernity and Self-Identity'* which, offers a particularly useful analysis of how self-identity is constructed during the period of late modernity. This work is helpful for understanding the complexities of adult's motivations to act or behave in certain ways and how they may choose to express different aspects of their identities. Giddens sees late modernity as the period

at the end of the twentieth century, where self-identity can be reflexively understood in relation to a person's biography or as he states, "A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour... (or) in the reaction of others, but in the capacity to keep a narrative going." (Giddens, 1991:54)

So, for Giddens the reflexivity that social actors have developed means that our sense of self (who we are) has become a reflexive project. The social changes attributed to modernity has resulted in, identity, instead of being seen as predictable, stable and fixed as something the individual needs to explore, analyse and construct against a fluid and constantly changing social milieu. Giddens does however offer a proviso that stratification plays a part in this process and that ontological security must be reasonably stable to enable individuals to be able to reflect and be reflexive about all aspects of their personal life history. This principle is also resonant in Maslow's (1968) work on human motivation that once basic physiological needs are met we can then progress to a deeper set of needs. If we can progress through subsequent 'need' hierarchies Maslow suggests we can eventually fulfil the process of self-actualisation. What both these theorists are saying albeit, from different perspectives, is that individuals have the capacity, once they have established ontological security, to be able to progressively construct aspects of their personalities into a perceived positive sense of identity. The suggestion being made here is that as relative standards of living have increased over the last few decades (Bocock, 1993) and as individual's basic needs have been more readily met they have been able to focus on fulfilling other needs. Such needs are often satisfied through material possessions.

Jenkins (1996) argues that whilst we seem to want to know who we are individually and what we perceive to be our personal identity or sense of self is something that is much more fundamental than we may have previously recognised. Jenkins suggests that knowing who we are and who others are is a pre-requisite of social action and therefore, all human identities are in some sense social identities. According to Jenkins, identity can only be understood as a process as being or becoming, identities are never a final or a settled matter. If identities are fluid and changing, as Jenkins suggests, perhaps the grounding of those identities can be seen to take shape in something more tangible such as material possessions. Lunt and Livingstone (1992) argue that personal identity is fundamentally social and that modern consumer culture actively creates the need to discover an identity.

Consumption, it could be argued, is the very arena where adolescents (and even young children) can start to test out their identities or inscribe a particular message through their use and ownership of individual fashion items and material possessions. Parents also could be seen to be establishing their own identities as well as their children's at this key stage in the young person's lifecycle. Erikson, (1963) working within a Freudian framework, offers us the idea that adolescence is a period when the individual is searching for an identity. At this period in their lives adolescents try out different roles without necessarily committing themselves to any one. Whilst grappling with their own sense of identity individuals must, at each life cycle stage struggle with social forces which the individual must confront and resolve. It is often at this stage when young people do experiment with differing identities or rebel against parental identities. This rebellion arguably enables young people to locate

their own identity in what may be seen (to them) as a very rigid, inflexible and rule-bound environment.

Children and young people may face many dilemmas about their sense of 'self' as they progress through the various stages of their identity formation. Those dilemmas may be expressed through their social action. Erikson, for example, suggested that, for children, playing with toys is not just a symbol of the pleasures of consumerism but is also a mental transformation from the everyday to the recreation of a self in an imaginary world (Kline, 1993). Erikson argues that identity is not something given or fixed but something we could create in relation to other individuals or groups around us. The beginnings of identity formation in childhood is linked to the child having an awareness of their individual way of experiencing the world against a group identity linked through space and time (Erikson, 1963). The child is learning to juggle their own sense of being in the world, but this is in relation to significant others in their lives. Dittmar (1992) takes the argument one step further when she suggests that through social interaction and communication especially within the family and their peer groups children are able to develop a more integrated and complex representation of their material objects as part of their identity. In short Dittmar suggests that identity is established, maintained, reproduced and transformed in relation to our material possessions.

If identity is a central part of our very existence, as Erikson argues, and if material possessions have mediating properties and influences over children's sense of self then this raises important questions that need to be explored by the sociologists of consumption. There is a need to think carefully as to how best we can understand both

the communicative elements of material goods and how those goods impact on the sorts of identities children may want to express taking into account the economic, gender, class and ethnic constraints they are operating within. Given the difficulties inherent in trying to operationalise a concept such as identity, a useful way forward may be to look at the meanings with which people endow material possessions. As Dittmar argues:

“the significance of material goods stems largely from the symbolic meanings they carry and communicate. The symbolic significance of possessions is their relationship to our sense of identity and the identity of others”

(1992:66)

Individuals narratives may be the means by which we can try and capture what those meanings might be and how consumer goods may be used as a means of expressing aspects of children’s identity. Through social interaction and communication especially within the family and peer groups, children develop a more integrated and complex representation of their material objects as part of their identity (Dittmar, 1992:86).

Both Erikson and Dittmar seem to be suggesting that for children, interaction with material possessions such as toys is also part of a bigger process in terms of their developing identities. Through experimentation with objects children begin to position their identity in terms of their own sense of ‘self’ and how they relate to others. De Certeau (1984) argues that through experimenting with objects we discover meaning in the uses that we find for them. Through this process we redefine objects, replenishing them with meanings and significations and as such the consumer is able to resist the dominant economic order (Gabriel and Lang 1995). For De Certeau

meanings are not conjured up by dominant marketers or advertising agencies but they emerge from consumers' active engagement with consumer culture.

Configurations of material possessions serve to locate others in terms of class, status and social position and these evaluations convey impressions of the owner's personal qualities and attributes (Belk, 1981; Dittmar, 1992). For children and young people perhaps the 'configurations' that Dittmar talks about offer the means by which they will at some level fit in or belong. Thus far, the way in which those signifiers impact on the process of constructing identity has yet to be fully tested within the sociology of childhood literature. This study will try to redress part of that imbalance and to look at the personal social and cultural aspects of material possessions. It is the cultural aspects of both material possessions and identity to which I will now turn.

Consumption and cultural identity

Cultural identities are also often routed through consumer goods. We use certain products, signs and symbols as signifiers of where we see ourselves within social hierarchies. Consumer goods seem to be important to children in relating to others as evidence of their inclusion in particular social groups. Using the example of du Gay *et al.* (1997) on how consumer goods such as the 'Sony Walkman' became cultural intermediaries Miller (1987) argues that consumption is also an act of work through which we create our cultural identity. Consumer goods then, are not simply inanimate objects and in the case of the 'Walkman' a machine which functions to provide a medium where individuals can listen to their own choice of music at any time and virtually in any place. Through branding, sensitive life-styling and engineering, material possessions are subsequently imbued with a whole set of meanings. The endorsement by public figures, sports heroes and popstars through advertising makes

the object animate or, as du Gay asserts, advertising is constructing identities through the representation and positioning of the goods being portrayed. Consumer goods tell us through their positioning and advertising what sorts of identities we can become (du Gay, 1997). The positioning of consumer goods and niche marketing that occurs could be seen as being central to the relationships between children and their peers and is something that will be explored further in Chapter 4.

Other forms of identities such as occupational status have always been a primary site for the construction of an identity and often our occupational status impacts on other aspects of our lives. Changes in the labour market in the second half of the twentieth century saw the gradual erosion of traditional occupations and was the beginning of a shift whereby, individuals were having to look beyond work as a means of identity-fulfilment. As society became more technologically driven and built on the foundations of increased educational and qualification levels, employment shifted to financial services such as banking and insurance (Bell, 1973). These labour market changes were also significant because it could be argued they heralded a cultural turn in how an individual's identity was shifting to one constructed through a lifestyle, as Bocock suggests, "...this marked a move away from the primary source of identity being upon the paid work role a person performed to identities being constructed around lifestyles and patterns of consumption" (1992:133).

Whilst I think that Bocock's point is relevant I would however argue that our relationship to the labour market does still offer a link in terms of constructing an identity. If consumer goods are used as a means of identity construction then it surely follows that the cost of those goods can only be met by the level of disposable income

that an individual has available which in turn, will ultimately be reflected in their relationship to the labour market.

In a consumer based society we are led to believe by authors such as Hall (1997) that social actors can construct their identities by drawing on discourses and systems of representations, which are fed to us through advertising and the media. This production of meaning is arguably what makes products sell. Goods are positioned within the marketplace to speak to particular groups of consumers. McCracken (1988) suggests that advertising works by making goods and images tell stories and it is those stories that transfer the meaning to the consumer. Althusser (1971) terms this process as 'interpellation,' which is something that takes place at the unconscious level whereby the individual is connecting with the image or message being portrayed by the advertiser. This may offer sociologists an insight in to why niche marketing and targeted advertising can be seen to be so successful and why individuals may well 'say' one thing but 'act' in an entirely different way.

Lasch (1991) argues that consumption, seems to address itself to the spiritual desolation and anomie of modern life and offers itself as the 'cure'. The dilemma is that the cure which is offered through the shopping mall and consumer goods and services is ephemeral because once you obtain the item that you think will palliate your anxieties, a new anxiety emerges (Lasch, 1991). It is this very cycle of need, want, acquisition and ultimately disappointment that consumer capitalism thrives on as Gabriel and Lang (1995) suggest. Picking up on Lasch's work Giddens (1991) argues that a central threat to the project of the self is that the self becomes commodified through advertising and niche marketing. The market identifies people's

insecurities and then offers, through either products or services, solutions to the dilemmas that individuals face as they reflexively monitor aspects of their identities. Self-help, therapy, spiritual development and fulfilment has been sold from text, television screens and the internet. It seems that what Giddens is proposing is that consumption offers the space for individuals to process information and then re-shape their lives accordingly, but crucially all this is mediated through images that we consume as viewers or readers.

I am not suggesting that the idea of consumption being bound up with the notion of identity is new. As Jenkins (1996) argues advertisers have always seen the idea of selling something to people as being as much about selling them a new look, a new image or even a new identity. What does seem to be new according to Jenkins is that people are much more sophisticated in their awareness of the links between what is being sold and what they are buying. Social actors have however, had to become more self-consciously collusive about the whole consumption process (1996). We may articulate the issues on one level but at a deeper level we still buy in to the messages that are created through dominant advertising discourses. It is also worth reflecting on Jenkins' point that for many a new identity never really progresses any further than the imagination.

We must be cautious when assuming that a continually refining and consciously reflexive self is a project that is available to all. There is a definite need for data, which seeks to address what identity means to individuals in everyday language, how identity is constructed and managed across disparate groups as a lived experience. As Warde (1994a) shows us, "*consumption matters*" and it matters because "it seriously

affects self-identity, which is a critical part in the creation and a valued sense of self' (p:882).

Concluding comments

Identities are often constructed through what are seen to be the legitimate version of the social world. These legitimate identities are constructed and reinforced through the dominant classes in society. As I suggested earlier in this chapter there are difficulties inherent in trying to operationalise concepts such as identity. What we should not do is shy away from those difficulties into abstraction and academic debate. Rather we need to think more carefully about how we can grapple with what is a key issue for the understanding of contemporary social life. Researchers need to be honest about the limitations involved in trying to harvest useful data in this field. Perhaps a good place to begin such an exploration, would be to start with the individuals' narratives of how they see various aspects of their identities and to try and ascertain the meanings that children attach to their material possessions. A useful starting point would be to place identity within the milieu of material possessions and consumer culture. Nowhere does this seem to be more salient than in the arena of familial expenditure and consumption patterns. Identifying what role material possessions play in the mediation of identities or the meanings attached to those possessions not only for children themselves but also for parents on behalf of their children. This may offer a valuable insight in to an area of the social world that has so far been relatively uncharted.

Within this thesis an individual's access to resources is seen as being extremely relevant in understanding the links between social classes, families and the process of

consumption. The argument here is that such links may provide an invaluable means of coming to terms with what currently constitutes the relationship between consumption and identity. As Lunt and Livingstone (1992) argue through a combination of biographical, family, gender and cultural forces a person-object relation is negotiated which in turn gives rise to identities, understanding and everyday practices.

A cleavage has emerged within the social sciences as to whether class is a useful way of looking at individual lifestyles and life chances and whether we would be better to focus on other aspects of contemporary social life such as identity. Crompton (1993) sums up the class analysis debate when she asserts that a schism has developed between those who study class structure and social mobility through highly sophisticated statistical techniques and those who focus on class formation and consciousness through ethnographic approaches. These two often methodologically opposed camps have resulted in a stalemate which has encouraged many theorists to turn away from the class debate into issues of identity. In actual fact, both these debates raise important questions that need empirical investigation, notably in relation to questions of inequality and exclusion in contemporary society. It is this area of the literature that forms the basis of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

The Inequalities of Consumption

In the previous chapter I focused on the relationship between consumption, the meanings attached to material possessions and identity. The suggestion was that the sociological literature of the 1990s tended to focus on the issue of identity without recourse to an individual's relative socio-economic position. This chapter will argue that access to resources, social class and material inequality should be central to any meaningful discussion within the sociology of consumption. The increased levels of income inequality over the last two decades (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1995; Harvey, 2001), could be argued to have complicated the social picture of the differences in people's everyday lived experiences and their links to the consumption process. As Crompton *et al.* (2000) suggest lived experiences and understanding of social institutions and social action are integral to the processes of production, distribution and consumption. These processes are "class processes and they produce classes" (Crompton *et al.* 2000:12).

This research is primarily a study of children's relationships with contemporary consumer culture and the specific focus of children's issues and consumption will be discussed in Chapter 4. However, the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor and its divisive principles and effects on children and their families will be discussed within this chapter. The focus will be on the social changes that have occurred over the last century and, principally, there is the argument within sociology that class came to be of much less relevance than had been previously thought (Clark

and Lipset, 1991; Pakulski and Waters, 1996). The suggestion here is that very little is known empirically about the impact of social class and material inequalities on consumption.

When trying to ascertain issues of inequality it may be prudent to look at what is 'consumed' and what and how choices are made in relation to the amount of money spent on toys, fashion, games, gifts and leisure time in relation to the proportion of household income. Middleton *et al.* (1994) suggests that over the last decade there has been evidence to suggest that there are now clear socio-economic divisions for children growing up in Britain today. Social class is bound up with inequality and issues of poverty and social exclusion. Whilst much has been written about the effects of social class reproduction and poverty on families who have very limited incomes or who are reliant on state benefits, very little has been researched or written about in terms of what effects (if any) the consumption process has on their lives. I would also suggest that to discuss consumption and the impact it has on individual lives without looking at their access to resources simply seems to negate the complexities that often belie individual motivation to acquire particular goods. This last point seems to be highly relevant when looking at the familial dynamics between both parents and children and children and their peers as well as their attitudes and behaviour towards the consumption process *per se*. There is, for example, a particular need to understand more fully what it means to live in a consumer based society when individuals don't have the resources to participate fully and to reflect on whether not having sufficient assets heightens material inequalities and causes even greater social divisions. Looking at Bauman's (1998) work of what it means to be poor and living in a consumer society and using Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) work on the different types of

capital that individuals accrue throughout their formative years will be seen as the foundation for this thesis. This chapter will also outline why Bourdieu's work could be broadened out to encompass groups generally excluded from certain forms of capital in Bourdieu's previous work. The argument will be made that the work of both Bourdieu and Bauman is especially useful when trying to look at how different social class groups use consumer goods as a means of expressing particular aspects of their identities in their everyday lives.

One of the major issues that has dominated sociological literature has been the debate surrounding the usefulness of and the methodological problems inherent in trying to understand concepts such as social class, inequality, social exclusion, deprivation and poverty. One major difficulty has been centred on the problem of definition. Class, occupation, social mobility, and issues of meritocracy often all end up getting conflated under the one umbrella term of 'social class'. As Crompton and Scott argue "...popular debates about individual social mobility for example, have as much to do with status or prestige as they do with 'class' defined in its economic sense" (2000:1). This chapter will focus on is how social class and inequality debates have evolved in the literature and why the increased levels of inequalities that now exist need to be directly related to the subject of consumption.

I mentioned in Chapter 2 that as capitalism advanced in western societies we saw mass consumption emerge in western Europe for all but the very poorest social groups (Bocock, 1992). As individuals' relative standards of living increased, particularly in Britain during the post Second World War period the idea that social class was of decreasing relevance to an individual's life chances or lifestyle was something that

was becoming central to mainstream sociology (Pahl, 1984; Gorz, 1982; Bauman, 1982). The suggestion here is that class is as central as it ever was and that not having the resources required to consume may impede the ability of individuals to participate fully in the society in which they live. Although this may seem obvious on the one hand on the other it is often a neglected point. There is a need, as Devine and Savage (2000) suggest, to reconsider the material inequalities which arise out of market processes and the social inequalities springing from consumption and lifestyles. During the 1980s and the 1990s, unlike sociology in America, British sociology has tended to neglect the 'economic' aspect of class relations. This has, in turn, resulted in the growing income and wealth inequalities not being addressed by the sociological literature. Rather the focus has tended to be on questions of culture and identity (Devine and Savage 2000).

Social class is part of everyone's social characteristics as is comprised of tangible elements such as income, education and occupation which can be empirically measured and offered as an indicator of an individual's place in the social structure. Likewise there are often intangible elements that do not fit easily into the current schema, but are no less an inherent part of the class structure. Bradley (1999) argues that class is not the property of an individual. It is a nexus of relationships in which society arranges itself through goods and services. Whether we understand class, consider it relevant or irrelevant, we cannot escape it. Individuals in the class system are often unaware of how pervasive it is in their lives. Traditionally class was seen as a pivotal and central force around which society could be studied. Classical sociologists such as Marx (1844/1981) saw an individual's socio-economic position as being fixed from birth and directly related to their relationship to the means of

production. Wider political and social changes in the post-Second-World-War period in Britain within the labour market blurred relationships to the means of production, which inevitably started to highlight problems in using a singularly economic definition of social class. The suggestion is that during the post-war era the discussion deviated into issues of embourgeoisement and ultimately topics such as social mobility and meritocracies emerged (Crompton and Scott 2000). The 'deviation' that Crompton and Scott discuss has conflated arguments about social class with issues of social mobility and meritocracy. As a result it is too easy for people to mistake consumer goods as tangible evidence of an individual's social mobility. For example owning a television was once a symbol of affluence, but nowadays its absence is a sign of poverty (Lunt and Livingstone 1992). Superficially many people argue that people's perceived increase in material wealth is an indicator of social mobility. What is not acknowledged, however, is that as one group progresses up the social scale so other groups differentiate themselves through more expensive or elusive items (Bocock 1993; Lunt and Livingstone 1991). The use of consumer goods as a means of social differentiation is arguably no less prevalent now than it ever was and even when lower class groups achieve the symbols of middle-class status, the boundaries are repositioned. According to Bocock (1993), certain groups demarcate themselves from others through consumer goods and is arguably the basis on which much of contemporary advertising is based. For example, buying product X will offer you the lifestyle associated with the group to which you aspire in other words as Gabriel and Lang (1995) suggest, the medium becomes the message.

A schism seems to have occurred within the sociology debates where arguments that once would have been centred on social class now focus on questions of culture and

cultural privilege (Bourdieu, 1984). Trying to explore the juncture between class, culture and consumption has resulted in authors such as Skeggs (1997) highlighting that social relations are classed, raced and gendered [*sic*]. Skeggs argues that many working class groups often try to disidentify from their original class position because of the labelling and pathologising that has been attached to particular working class behaviours or taste. Arguably, then in Skegg's terms some working class groups could be seen to choose to disidentify from working class groups or forms of working class culture in to what is perceived as more middle class groups because it is seen as a signifier of success and respectability. Skeggs (1997) in her longitudinal ethnographic research on 'becoming respectable' found that many working class women tried to distance themselves from a 'working class' label because it had become tied up with being 'potentially degenerate', 'rough' and being in sociological terms the 'other'.

Being able to own material possessions that communicate a 'meaning' to others or include individuals in activities that are seen to be socially appropriate to specific socio-economic groups is something that could be seen to be central to parents reasoning to buy their children certain consumer goods. These signifiers of contemporary society arguably convey a message across all social class groups. This could therefore be seen to be a reason why families where household income may not be sufficient to provide certain items go to greater lengths to provide their children with the items owned by their peers (Middleton, *et al.* 1994). Skeggs (1997) study demonstrates not only the continuing relevance of class but also the complexities inherent in trying to understand contemporary forms of class identities. The disidentification of their class identity by the women in Skeggs study suggests not only the inability to be able to confront their social class position but offers a salient

example of the real power of class (Savage *et al.* 2001). Edgell suggests that “what needs to be explained is not the presumed demise of class but the tenacity of class based patterns of inequality” (1993:122) Consumption patterns and relationships to the consumption process, it could be argued, represent the ideal medium from which to identify some of those inequalities.

Sociological research undertaken during the post-war era pointed to changes in the shape of the class structure and issues of meritocracy became central to both educational debates and matters of social mobility (Crompton and Scott, 2000). The shift into meritocracy issues initiated investigations into social mobility between classes (Glass, 1954). Meritocracy issues have been extensively argued by authors such as Saunders (1998). Saunders argues for instance, that in modern Britain if you are bright and committed, as defined within an education system, you are likely to succeed in the occupational sphere, irrespective of the social class from which you start out. Issues of meritocracy, however, often mask the notion that barriers, often invisible, do exist to prevent, in particular, working class children and children from certain ethnic minority groups from succeeding both at school and subsequently in the labour market (Stanworth, 1983; Lynch and O’Neill, 1994; Skeggs, 1997). Stanworth exposes this concept as a ‘cherished myth’ and argues what is offered in the education system is the ‘myth of a meritocracy’ because schools do not accept children ‘impartially.’ Children are not reshuffled according to ability. Stanworth concludes “...the overwhelming evidence is that our education system favours those that are already privileged and puts obstacles in the path of those who are disadvantaged” (1983:9).

This viewpoint is reinforced by Bourdieu who also argues that despite theories for a meritocracy, institutions such as education are class driven and reinforce middle class attitudes and aspirations, whilst enhancing social inequalities. Bourdieu asserts that the education system more than the family or religion has become the institution most responsible for the transmission of social inequality in modern societies (Swartz, 1997). “The task of the sociologist therefore, is to determine the contribution made by the educational system to the reproduction of the structure of the power relationship and symbolic relationships between social classes” (Bourdieu, 1973:71)

For all the arguments that exist for social mobility it is worth reflecting on Townsend’s (1993) work and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation study (1998) which supports the proposition that those at the bottom of the socio-economic groupings escaping from long term poverty are relatively few and far between. This last point demonstrates not only the resilience of class but also the resilience of poverty. Levels of inequality have tripled over the last two decades (Gregg *et al.* 1998) and juxtaposed to that is the growth in advertising and media interaction. How do children themselves make sense of issues of inequality? Is there an argument to suggest, for example, that children become classless because they have no direct access to the labour market? By this I mean, is consumption part of a unifying process across all groups? For example, irrespective of the socio-economic position of the families in which children live could it be argued that what children aspire to, and what parents provide, are the same items across all social class groups? Is it likely that for children to be included amongst their peer groups the universality of possessions that signify inclusion results in social class as an indicator of difference collapsing?

An alternative approach to the structure and agency dilemma for individual life chances has been provided by Young (1994), who suggests that because people are classified by educational ability the gap between the classes has inevitably widened. Much of this is attributable to children having to stay on in education longer and government policies which encourage young people into further and higher education in order to access the labour market. The upper classes know that success is a reward for their achievement. The lower classes conversely have been told they have an equal chance and if they do not succeed it is because they are somehow inferior. Young (1994) asserts that at whatever level whether people have failed or succeeded in the education system they firmly believe that their children or grandchildren can enter the meritocracy and make up for what they themselves were unable to achieve. Young's point I think could be quite central to parents' motivation to provide children with 'better' (improved) chances both educationally and socially. Parents, it could be argued, invest heavily in particular possessions and services to give their children the best chance they can in both their educational and wider social networks for reasons that have not necessarily been identified in the literature thus far. It is both parents' motivations and children's aspirations within the arena of consumption that I will now seek to explore.

Familial dynamics and contemporary consumer culture

‘...the simple point that the maintenance of consumption practices is heavily dependent upon economic class should not be forgotten’
(Crompton, 1996:118).

Both parents and children alike face many pressures to keep up with market trends and current fashions for fear of being marginalised and socially excluded. As

Middleton *et al.* (1994) and Kempson *et al.* (1994) state this seems to be particularly true of parents who are on very limited incomes but yet when faced with extremely tight household budgets often give in to commercial or children's pressure to buy certain products. In terms of consumer patterns, for many low income families prioritising over bill paying, shopping and rent is a regular occurrence and for some a full-time job in itself. It is recognised that for most families whatever income group they belong to they have to balance income and expenditure. For 'poorer' families, however priorities are not about holidays, new cars and social activities but about everyday basic necessities. In a study carried out by the Policy Studies Institute (1994) a lone mother who owed money to almost all of her creditors was willing to forego paying almost everything in order to buy a Nintendo game for her children lamenting "We are going to live off fresh air all for a Nintendo game." (Kempson *et al.* 1994:131).

Children's needs then, as the above quotation illustrates, are often seen by parents as a higher priority than their own needs and in some cases children's needs are indeed prioritised over bill paying. Middleton *et al.* (1997) concluded in their study that for primary aged children, lone parents and parents on income support spend almost as much as other parents on their children at Christmas. Lone mothers in particular think it is important that their children do not stand out from their friends. Less well off parents are more inclined to feel guilty about not being able to give their children what they want. Arguably children from poorer backgrounds face stigmatisation both on the grounds of their poverty and their failure to conform to the latest consumer trends.

In Middleton *et al's* (1994) study 67% of children from less affluent families believed they could get what they wanted from parents eventually, compared to 42% of children living in more affluent households. Better off parents were also more vocal in emphasising their determination to resist peer group pressure both from other mothers and other children. Is this about what Miller (1998) describes as 'shopping for sacrifice' where consumer goods are being bought (sacrificed) in the anticipation of a materially better future for their children than they had themselves (Bulchi and Lucas, 2000)? Parents, it seems, give in to their children's repeated requests because they do not want their children to stand out from their peers or to experience feelings of marginalisation. Providing your children with symbols of contemporary consumer culture it could be argued may also be integral to issues of 'good parenting' in the minds of the parents.

Whilst much has been written about the effects of poverty on families who have no adult in full-time employment in relation to housing, diet and health very little has been researched or written about in terms of what effects (if any) the consumption process has on their lives. We live in a world that is heavily influenced by advertising and consumer culture yet there is an absence of research targeted within family contexts in which there are restricted household budgets. Socio-economic positioning is not as easily defined as it once was and certainly there is evidence of social mobility for certain groups in the post-war period, however those that are socially disadvantaged from birth and the proportion who manage a long term escape from poverty is relatively small. Between 80 and 90 percent of those found at or near the bottom of the income distribution in any one year are likely to be part of a persisting poverty problem (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1998).

The use, display and symbolism of material goods can be seen to be centrally placed in people's everyday lives by the way in which they are used to draw the lines of social relationships. Goods according to Douglas and Isherwood "make and maintain social relationships" (1979:60) they move the debate from an individualistic account to one of kinship and friendship, offering a cultural system of signs substituting a social order of values and classifications (Corrigan 1997). Ethnographic research by Douglas and Isherwood (1979) suggests that consumption classes are highly stratified and that the poorer end of the strata is effectively excluded by the high admission barriers imposed by those at the top end of the consumption process. The strength of Douglas and Isherwood's work is that they look beyond the superficiality of the acquisition of goods and try to illustrate the cultural importance and meaning that people attach to their possessions. The difficulty in establishing the links between social class indicators and consumption is that very little empirical work has been undertaken and as such we have a vast amount of theoretical work but very little evidence to reinforce those theories.

Some studies, however, have started to emerge which do specifically look at the links between socio-economic groups and their relationship with the consumption process. Middleton *et al.* (1994) studied the economic pressures that parents and children are faced with living in Britain in the early 1990s. Using a range of methods the study also looked at the negotiating mechanisms between parents and children. Middleton *et al.* looked at the everyday realities of having the resources to participate, or its negative corollary, the fear of exclusion and what that meant to both parents and children alike. Children from poorer families in this study identified very clearly that although they realised that their parents could not afford to give them the same things

as their wealthier peers they continue to want the same things as their wealthier peers. Whilst parents go to inordinate lengths to juggle often limited household budgets to buy their children some of the things that they wanted their children were still experiencing 'differentness' at an early age. Middleton sums up the difficulties that are inherent in families where income is at a lower level than the local/national average when she says "Parents try to teach them not to ask, and the children begin to learn how to go without." (p.150).

Kempson *et al.* (1994) looked specifically at the demands on poorer families' household budgets. Seventy-four families with children living on very low incomes were studied looking at how they 'made ends meet'. Primarily the researchers were interested in whether structural factors limited the options that families on low incomes had in overcoming the financial struggles they faced. The research wanted to identify whether it was more about the personal choices families made on how to use the resources that they had rather than not having enough resources to meet basic living costs. The research also focused on the factors that influenced their decisions to take particular courses of action. The study concluded that that living on income support or just above that level for any length of time meant that families would not be able to make ends meet. They often had hard choices to make to enable them to fulfil their daily living and that surviving without debt was not an option, this was not through fecklessness but because of necessity. Both these studies offer an invaluable insight into the complexities of familial household budgeting and the demands that are placed on families to enable children to be provided with items that are relative to the standards of living that are acceptable in wider society.

It seems that there are real differences between families that can participate more fully in the consumption arena and those that cannot, particularly when we look both employed and unemployed groups. An individual's access to employment and their place in the world of consumption is an area of the literature that Bauman (1998) highlights as being central to understanding the complexities of the inequalities that exist in individuals' everyday lives. Bauman introduces us to what he sees as a world of two nations, not of exploiter and exploited but of the 'seduced and the repressed'. The 'seduced' are those who are able to participate in the consumption process, able to exercise freedom and choice at the other end are the 'repressed' who are dependent on the welfare state, policed by coercive means through state provisions of services (Warde, 1994b). Bauman takes a very extreme view of the differential in being able to participate fully within a consumer society; "Those without access to market goods are, therefore denied the means to develop their human potential." (quoted in Keat *et al.* 1994:60) Bauman strikes at the heart of the inequalities debate by suggesting that the poor are recast as flawed consumers socially defined and self-defined as blemished, defective, faulty and deficient, in a society where the aesthetics of consumption now rules where the work ethic once ruled. Bauman also suggests that consumer culture alleviates the boredom and non-existence that goes hand-in-hand with poverty.

Poverty, Bauman suggests, is being cut off or excluded from whatever passes for a normal life. Arguably, we could say that this means not being up to the mark which results in feelings of shame and guilt. No wonder then that parents go to great lengths to shield their children from such feelings, perhaps ensuring they have the symbols or commodities represented in a 'normal' life. The rich become objects of adoration;

hence the obsessive media exposure on individuals who are set up as icons in their chosen sport or career. The constant exposure of celebrities such as Victoria and David Beckham known as 'Posh and Becks' to their adoring fans and who unwittingly (or wittingly in the case of the sponsors who pay huge sums of money to get these individuals to wear or advertise their products) set trends every time they or their young son appear in front of the press (Young, 1999).

There is a need to be mindful of Bauman's point that the "poorest fifth of the population in Britain are able to buy less than their equivalents in any other major Western country and that conversely the wealthiest fifth are the richest in Europe" (1998:41). The subjective sense of insufficiency with all the pain, stigma and humiliation which accompanies those feelings is aggravated and reinforced by the continuing growth of material inequality. Seabrook (1982) points out that the poor do not inhabit a separate culture from the rich. We are all living in a world where the penetration of images and goods are constant and unrelenting. These images remind us what we need to buy, wear or eat to ensure the right way of being in the world. Not having the resources to consume particular items, however, does not necessarily make individuals want them any the less.

Bauman's (1998) analysis is succinct in offering a view of the extreme polarity of the consumption spectrum and highlights graphically the inequalities that are still abundant in society. It seems, however, that Bauman is suggesting at times that you are either in or out of the consumption process depending on your economic position at any particular point in time. It may be more prudent to argue that we can never be totally out of the process, we may become more distanced from it but we can never be

completely removed from it. What Bauman's work is useful for, nonetheless, is to open up the debate and look at how further research in the field of consumption in relation to individuals from different social class backgrounds can help us understand more fully an individual's relationship to the consumption process. This research will try to contribute to the debate by looking at how differing levels of income and resources impact on individual attitudes to, and their use of, material possessions. The negotiating and motivating principles attached to the consumption process within households and the effects it has on familial household budgets will also be explored. To facilitate this research, which is essentially designed to look at the themes that may emerge from studying contemporary consumer culture amongst disparate social class groups, I want to consider the work of Pierre Bourdieu in more detail. Bourdieu's work on 'cultural capital' provides a potentially illuminating means of further enlightening an understanding between the relationship between class and consumption.

Why Bourdieu?

In the second half of the twentieth century Pierre Bourdieu, like Veblen before him, was keen to identify how different social groups differentiate themselves through their access to and use of consumer goods. For Bourdieu what we consume and how we consume always involve judgements by ourselves as well as the judgement of others (du Gay, 1997). Bourdieu argues that the dominant classes assert themselves through education acquiring what he terms as 'cultural capital'. Cultural capital is defined as knowledge and ease in exercising taste and making distinctions, which ultimately converts to social power (Slater, 1997). In this context, knowledge becomes important and the social and cultural value of new goods and more importantly how to use them

appropriately is the key for social networking for the new middle classes. Bourdieu potentially has more to say about an individual's relationship to consumer goods based on their socio-economic position than earlier theorists such as Veblen.

Bourdieu's theories of 'power' as capital and how that capital is mobilised and converted into different forms of capital which are 'traded' in wider social networks is a useful way at looking at intra-class groups and their reproduction of or resistance to certain social processes. For Bourdieu (1986) there are four generic types of capital;

1) Economic capital: money and property; 2) Cultural capital: cultural goods and services including educational credentials; 3) Social capital: acquaintances and networks; 4) Symbolic capital: legitimation. These types of capital are not equal.

Generally speaking economic capital (in capitalist societies) does always have the most influence and social worth attached to it. Additionally in modern societies a social actor's relationship to and income from the labour market generally offers higher social value and kudos amongst individuals. Bourdieu relates this value and advantaged position of the middle/upper classes as a direct result of being able to acquire and use cultural capital in the form of educational credentials and social capital in the form of networks.

It is being proposed within this research that less well-off families have a distinct lack of economic and cultural capital so they invest heavily in social and symbolic capital the latter giving them something with which to trade to ensure inclusion in wider social networks. Whilst all four types of capital are available and being mobilised both unconsciously and consciously in middle class groups the suggestion is that for working class families only two types of capital are available. If economic capital is

limited and there is a disaffection from investment in educational capital, the suggestion here is that individuals invest heavily in goods and services that give them higher levels of social and symbolic capital.

Each act of consumption, according to Bourdieu, reproduces social difference and communicates social meaning (Corrigan 1997). The types of goods that consumer groups aspire to are of central importance here. There has undoubtedly been a blurring of the boundaries between certain class groups and between high and low culture. Dominant groups try to establish positional goods to create prestige. Malt whisky for example, once a drink of the elite is now accessible to the masses. What then happens is the elite must then re-establish themselves by consuming something scarcer like a single malt whisky as a signifier of their social status (Bocock 1993). The use of and positioning of particular goods, are as Bocock suggests, heavily tied in to issues of social status. Weber would argue what we have here is consumption as a social activity and the setting up of status groups through patterns of consumption (Bocock, 1992). Those goods which act as social signifiers of an individual's wealth or status can act as social mechanisms which include some individuals but exclude others. Groups that are afforded high social status notably by the mass media become icons whose lifestyle and taste is emulated. These groups may not have what Bourdieu would consider to be high levels of educational or cultural capital but their economic and their social capital is signified through consumer goods and as such may well position their consumption preferences as being something worth aspiring to.

Attempting to offer a structuration theory of sorts, Bourdieu's argument acknowledges structural inequalities which guide and constrain individual's actions.

But ultimately these structures do not determine actions, beliefs, values and desires (Bocock, 1993). Bourdieu's attempts at bridging the 'structure and agency' dilemma introduces us to the idea of 'habitus' which is a schema that classifies rules and expectations and then unconsciously directs individuals to make certain choices. Our habitus is inculcated as much by experience as by explicit teaching, it is according to Jenkins (1992) the mediating link between the subjective world of the individual and the cultural world, which that individual shares with others. Similar to Weber's notion of life chances our habitus is built around our early experiences, our socialisation structures, which then becomes our internal software system that we use to interact within wider social structures. This interaction then relates to subsequent perceptions and aspirations. It becomes according to Swartz (1997), a matrix that generates self-fulfilling prophecies according to different class opportunities, structural disadvantage and can be internalised and produce self-defeating behaviours. This idea can be seen in Shropshire and Middleton's (1999) study where they found that children living in poor families lowered their expectations and aspirations. Poorer children had already started to develop mindsets about where their opportunities may lie and had started to ask for less so as to protect adults feelings or to hide their own feelings of disappointment when they could not have what they had asked for. Bourdieu asserts that the habitus 'leads individuals into a kind of submission to order' (Swartz, 1997:105) which arguably legitimates economic and social inequality by concealing structural advantages against the milieu of a perceived meritocracy.

As well as the notion of habitus Bourdieu also discusses the notion of a 'field'. A field is defined as, 'A structured system of social positions occupied either by individuals or institutions...a field is structured internally in terms of power relations'

(Jenkins, 1992:85). A field then, is about wider structural institutional socialising mediums such as families, educational systems, peer groups and political groups. We participate in them freely (by varying degrees of choice and autonomy) but each of them has a material context. Fields are also positioned through narratives such as political ideology, soap operas and suchlike from which we are given idealised often sanitised versions of family life. They are also differentially positioned depending on the field we are operating within or the social expectations and constraints that are enforced upon us in different social situations. The boundaries of a field, are according to Jenkins, imprecise and shifting but they are by definition a 'field of struggles' within which individuals seek to preserve or improve their positions. Swartz (1997) argues that fields specify power relations and hierarchy and potentially have the means to "offer a much richer analysis of the producer-consumer relations than does the image of the market" (p.292).

Bourdieu's insistence that each class was defined by its consumption as much as by its position in the relations of production (Lane, 2000) is a salient point when thinking about contemporary issues for young people. Many young people's opportunities in the formal labour market are limited because they have been disaffected from the education system. They subsequently do not have the qualifications they require in an increasingly credentialised society, therefore the importance of material possessions is heightened to enable them to express their sense of 'self.' Young people may seek to ground their identity in goods, which serve as concrete examples of their self-worth and value in society to themselves and with their peers. These possessions also offer acceptance within wider social groups and for young people this is an inclusion that is based on their ownership, use and display of contemporary consumer goods.

In a critique of Bourdieu's theory Swartz states that Bourdieu's 'culture as capital' metaphor is less useful for analysing groups with few power resources (1997:289). I would however suggest that Swartz is perhaps using a narrowly defined version of culture and that disadvantaged groups are using their own forms of culture which they to convert to capital in their social networks. Identifying what types of capital are available to children and how working class groups aspire to and use that capital is an area that has been neglected thus far within the sociology of consumption. A criticism levelled at Bourdieu is that he focuses very heavily on the dominant classes in his work on cultural and economic capital and has devoted very little attention to analysing intraclass differences within the working classes (Swartz, 1997). This study will try at least tentatively to link in to and build on Bourdieu's work and focus on how consumer goods are used by differing social groups in contemporary society. In particular if working class groups are using other forms of culture, which they can convert to social capital in their everyday lives, what shape do those forms take and how do we make sense and understand that culture more fully?

A major focus of this research will be to try and identify how material inequalities impact on children's lives and in particular their relationship to the world of consumption. This reflects Bourdieu's contention that there is a need to study the symbolic dimension of class struggles and to try and map out how those issues get played out in everyday scenarios. Whether we choose to focus on class, social mobility or meritocracy the baseline is that economic inequality has been widening against a growing backdrop of a 'consumerist' society. How that impacts on children's broader experiences has yet to be fully researched but improved standards

of living within wider society does not necessarily result in equality. As Bourdieu asserts even though all classes have seen their standard of living improve in the post-war era 'the pecking order remains the same.' (Swartz, 1997:183).

Concluding comments

If we are to draw together the central themes of the class, consumption and identities literature we can see that for all the obituaries written about class and the suggestion that identities have superseded traditional indicators of class, class is still a relevant but contested area of the debate. We may be able to analyse class, consumption and identity theoretically but the relationship between the individual, their sense of self and what they consume is a gap that exists within empirical sociology. What are the links between class and the capacity to consume and the resilience of poverty? Levels of inequality continue to widen and there is a need to try and understand what that may mean for individuals in their daily lives. Mapping out the cultural dimensions that are associated with class and consumption and whether different socio-economic use material goods in different ways are all areas of the debate that need further research and analysis.

Looking more closely we can see that there are areas where we still need to 'chip away at' in order to really understand the structures that exist below the often superficial arguments that are offered through public and media discourses. Much of Bourdieu's (1984) work has become firmly embedded in current sociological debates and *'Distinction'* has been seminal in helping researchers understand the complexities of social class. Certainly Bourdieu's 'culture as capital' metaphor offered sociologists a 'tool' with which to analyse class behaviours and attitudes. Whilst Bourdieu focuses

heavily on the middle and upper classes, there is I believe scope to broaden out parts of Bourdieu's theory to enlighten our understanding as to how working class groups relate to and use different types of culture in their everyday lives.

Consumption has established itself as a site where many individuals choose to invest large amounts of their time, energy and resources and in a stratified society such as ours the area of consumption is often value-laden. Social researchers need to delve more deeply within the discourses surrounding consumption, social class and identities to offer a richer analysis of these central areas of people's everyday lives. Wider social shifts such as changes in family structures have changed significantly over the last two decades. The number of lone parent households has increased from 7% in 1971 to 22% of all families in 1998/99 and 9 out of 10 of those lone parents are mothers (Social Trends 2000). In this period levels of inequality have also widened (Gregg *et al.* 1998; Jenkins 1994) and families face increased pressures to compete within the marketplace to ensure they have the appropriate signifiers of contemporary social life. Families, and in particular children, arguably have to manage consumption in very different ways than they would have previously. This seems to be an increasing dynamic in terms of age grading, market positioning and ownership of certain consumer goods. This niche marketing has ensured that children are aware of what the right signifiers of contemporary social life are so as they do not get left out or left behind in wider social circles.

There appears to be a need to move the focus from the economic (but without completely losing sight of economic inequality) and placing consumption within social and cultural practices, as Devine and Savage (2000) suggest. Perhaps as these

authors argue there is a need to view culture and class as being inextricably bound together in specific material practices. Instead of trying to 'pin' class down it might be more useful to look at how cultural processes (such as consumption) are embedded within specific kinds of socio-economic practices (Devine and Savage, 2000:193/4). The sociological research within the arena of familial consumption practices is limited; an analysis of children who are now identified as a distinct segment of the market offers the means to link social change, social class/culture differences and consumption. The issues and debates that specifically surrounds children as consumers is the next area of the literature that will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Consuming Children: Consumption, Class and Childhood(s)

It is now recognised in the literature that children have become established in their own right as ‘consumers’ (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; McNeal, 1987; Euromonitor 1988). They are directly targeted to buy for themselves and to ‘persuade’ adults to buy for them. For younger children, however there is not the ‘independent’ income that many older children have, as for example, they cannot earn money outside of the home. Children are given money by parents and extended family and therefore over the last few decades have been directly targeted and ultimately become a distinct and lucrative segment of the market with an estimated spending power of £600 million (Gunter and Furnham 1998). For many children particularly in contemporary Western societies from the moment they are born they are immersed into a world of consumer goods. As they develop they take their first steps into the world of consumption and arguably as they embark on the training process to become consummate consumers it is as such, the advent of a career in consumerism.

This chapter aims to explore the changing nature of children’s consumer careers and to look at the many discourses surrounding this aspect of the sociology of consumption literature in relation to children thus far. It could be argued that just as women once consumed vicariously on behalf of their husbands (Veblen, 1899/1953) they are now doing the same for their children. Children arguably have moved from productive contributors to household economies to “objects of more or less conspicuous consumption” (Hood-Williams 1990:160). In this chapter I will discuss

wider social changes over recent decades such as the changes in household and familial structures as well as the role and influence of advertisers and niche marketing. The arguments put forward by sociologists surrounding the changing nature of childhood in western societies is also an area that will be explored and it is this last point that I intend to focus on first.

The social changes that have occurred particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century have left many political and social commentators arguing that there have been significant shifts in the contemporary notions of childhood (James *et al.* 1998; Mayall, 1996; Brannen, 1999; Moore, 2001). The idea that children are active social agents in their own right is a very recent phenomenon within the sociological literature and has not necessarily been fully adopted within the reality of children's everyday experiences. For most children, childhood and adolescence was always about being schooled for adulthood. Traditional notions of childhood are about adults in the making rather than children in the state of being (Brannen and O'Brien, 1995). Whilst the positioning of children as social actors has firmly embedded itself within academic discourses at both policy and practice level children's social status is still very much a contested agenda. Even within academic disciplines it has only been over the last decade that children's lives have been seen as worthy of study in their own right as opposed to within familial relationships. As Brannen (1999) argues renewed interest in childhood has meant that "sociologists have sought to uncouple children from the nuclear family and to reframe them conceptually...as subjects who construct their own consciousness and life trajectories" (p.143).

Changing Childhoods?

Historically it has been argued that childhood was launched in the mid-eighteenth century. Ariés (1962) states the sentiment of childhood emerged in the renaissance, and was chiefly about a patterning of images relating to different lifestages (Jenks, 1996). Children's recognition by adults and the form of their relationships with adults was distinctively different prior to this period. According to Ariés children were seen as 'little adults' who were present at most social gatherings and were noted as different from adults only in size. The temporal issues associated with their developmental cycles from infancy to child to adult have always existed but it seems that what Ariés was trying to point out was that the concept of childhood was a very different experience to how it had evolved during industrialisation and the advent of modernity. Ariés work has had its critics for relying too much on romanticism and visual images through art rather than how children actually lived in the wider society (Archard, 1993; Pollock, 1983). His work was, however, seminal within academic discourses for highlighting the changing and contradictory nature of childhood over time (Hill and Tisdall 1997).

Much of the early work in sociology focused heavily on the process of the socialisation of children and their relationships to and within various institutions. In particular, how children conformed to social norms within for example, the family and education systems, formed the basis of much of the early sociological thinking. What has evolved from this earlier work is a sociology *for* rather than *of* children (James *et al.* 1998). Over the last two decades sociology has sought to transform the notion of childhood as 'natural' to one of childhood as 'cultural' (Jenks 1996). The construction of a 'sociology of childhood' has helped highlight that children are a

social group on whom social forces operate. The discovery of children as agents has been codified as the 'new paradigm' (James and Prout 1990); as a call for children to be understood as social actors shaping, as well as shaped, by their circumstances. Being a child is always about change, and for children age and development are universal phenomena, in that, children at certain ages are expected to attain certain social competencies. This notion becomes more problematic when we look at what they can and can't do versus what they should and shouldn't do. Children's cognitive abilities may enable them to do things that adults deem to be inappropriate and which are very often tied into value based judgements and opinions particularly in relation to their social activities and more recently their relationship to consumer culture.

Discourses of Protection vs. Rights

The discourses of childhood that have evolved over the latter half of this century have been those based predominately on protection versus rights. This has created a tension between two dominant, yet opposing discourses. The first, being a discourse whereby, the child is in constant need of protection and therefore must be kept under adult surveillance. The second and opposing discourse is one where the child as a social actor should be afforded the same social rights as other individuals living in our society. This oscillation between a protection versus rights debate has resulted in the child being recast as both vulnerable and threatening. Marketing messages constructed around a sub-text of good parenting may also impact on how parents perceive their role and the wider sociological messages associated with signifiers of good parenting practice. This tension between protection versus power, living within and defined by mechanisms of regulation, has left both adults and children with contradictory messages about their roles and relationships with each other.

Age has traditionally been seen as a fundamental determinant in the distribution of rights, power and participation. Children by virtue of their years combined with their dependency on adults, ultimately have limitations imposed on their citizenship (Goldson, 1997). There has however, been an increasing recognition of children's rights. Children's lives are often shaped by global politics, and the child is not apolitical. Indeed, children are often targets for emotive advertising and for political persuasion. The 1989 Children's Act heralded a decisive shift in contemporary notions of childhood, and in particular the needs and the welfare of the child as opposed to the integrity of the family or the proprietorial interests of the parents became paramount (Wyness 2000). In theory the Act does offer children a voice and some rights in law. However, it could be argued that those rights are hard to operationalise in children's everyday lives. Alderson (1993), however, argues that the Act does at least make it possible for children to be political actors. Whatever one's viewpoint the legislation has opened the debate up and the argument about children's rights is always going to be complex given the age, cognitive and cultural differences in children. These arguments aside, the child in theory has been positioned as a political and social actor with his or her own agenda and opinions (James *et al.* 1998). Children's social positioning in the old adage of being seen and not heard has at last moved to a climate where as Giddens suggests "...in a democracy of the emotions, children can and should be able to answer back" (1999:6).

The counter discourse to the rights based agenda is one of children being in need of protection. Anxieties about litigation, 'stranger danger' and moral panics have all resulted in greater social control. This, arguably, has impacted on how children's social spaces have been redefined and how they spend their leisure time. Increasing

rationalisation with the progression of modernity has to a large degree resulted in regulated docile bodies because of anxious adults, yet arguably amongst all this children transgress and reshape their spaces (Barker 1999). Children have little choice in how they socialise and interact; opportunities for children to meet and socialise outside of school are extremely limited. This notion of protecting the child from the evils of the world, is according to some, stifling many children. This 'protection' is also impacting on how children can occupy their leisure time, for example, parents are reluctant to allow children to pursue traditional leisure activities i.e. games and play outside of the home (Thomson, 1999).

Moral panics fuelled by the media all too often remain embedded within parents' minds and as such the social world of children has now been divided into safe and dangerous places. Media penetration and moral panics have resulted in dichotomous thinking whereby the home has become a place of safety and the world outside has become a threat and a place full of risk. This 'public/private' split has resulted in the 'public' world outside of the home being seen by many social commentators and parents as a world that is dangerous for children. Those dangers are enveloped within a sub-text of sexual danger in a society where a notion of childhood is often threatened. This subsequently has consequences for how children perceive the world and as well as where they are allowed to go and the places in which they feel safe (Scott *et al.* 1999). The public world according to Scott *et al.* has become the place of danger whereas the home (the private world) albeit often a very dangerous place for children is perceived by children to be safe. This process of change that has resulted of late has very contradictory outcomes for children. If they cannot for example be left to play safely outside of their homes or in parks then they will have to revert to

other social activities and forms of play. In particular we see the huge growth of play areas attached to pubs, restaurants and shops where children can be released from parental supervision but still supervised and surveilled by other licensed adults. Those that may not have the family structures or the resources to participate in such activities may retreat even further in to their perceived private, safe place of the home where they have their own forms of entertainment such as toys, Hi-tech computer games, computers and music systems.

On the surface these changes to children's spatial geographies may seem to count as evidence that children have far too much in terms of material wealth. These assets however need to be measured against the underlying structures that may have created the social changes which have impacted on children's use of public spaces and their leisure time. It could be argued that the differences in children's social lives and in contemporary forms of play and leisure in recent decades is an unplanned consequence of wider social changes (Prout 2000a). The wider social changes that Prout refers to has seen the child recast from a position where, in early industrial society they were a familial economic asset to the child in today's society broadly being seen as an emotional asset. Improvements in child health, as well as changes in education policies, the labour market and household structures have also impacted on and resulted in nett changes to the way in which the concept of childhood has evolved.

Fragmented families?

Childhoods have undoubtedly changed over the last century and it could be argued that this has been as a result of the erosion and fragmentation of earlier family

structures. I would, however, add a caveat here in that the suggestion is not being made that there ever was a universal model of the family nor something that concurs with the romanticised view that often appears in popular accounts of family life in previous generations. What does seem to have made a difference over the last two decades are the changes in the labour market combined with a big shift in social policies. Arguably these political and social changes have impacted on the infrastructures that support family life in contemporary society as well as the rise of the consumer society that was discussed in Chapter 2. Many homes do not have a male breadwinner and the number of single parent families has tripled, 1 in 5 families are now headed by a lone parent and 9 out of 10 of these lone parents are mothers (Social Trends 2000). These changes have subsequently had a bearing on children's lives as social actors and consumers. In this section I want to outline these changes and discuss how they have impacted directly on to the concept of the child's consumer needs.

All children growing up within the family are dependent on the distribution of the resources available within the household income and currently one fifth of children live in households where no adult is in paid employment this figure is twice the 1979 level (IoS 17/10/99:6). This has resulted in what Pahl (1984) terms 'work-rich' and 'work-poor' homes and for many families there have been periods of long-term unemployment often followed by short-term casualised low paid jobs. The notion of paid employment in the traditional sense has changed significantly in the post-war period and as was suggested in Chapter 2, it could be argued that the notion of creating identities through employment has now been shifted from what we do to what we buy. A key area then within this debate is the increasingly divided society

that children encounter, where income distribution has become skewed in favour of more affluent households (Stewart, 1992). Whilst the majority of children are exposed to advertising through the television and the media there are, according to Stewart, a substantial minority of those who finds themselves marginalised and excluded from mainstream material and social wealth, which, arguably results in tension and resentment.

Despite the rise of the welfare state and government initiatives to eradicate childhood poverty unfortunately it is still a part of many children's lives. Child poverty levels based on the fixed poverty line of half the national average income rose from just 10% of the population in 1968 to a third of all children (over 4.3 million) in 1995/6 (Gregg *et al.* 1998). This is also a key dynamic in terms of the complexities of the argument surrounding social class and consumption. Levels of inequality are greater now than they were three decades ago but the shift into a much more consumer based society, it could be argued, has meant that those inequalities are magnified by an individual's lack of material possessions.

In 1999 the 'Independent on Sunday' (Cook, 17 October) newspaper ran a feature on the many guises of Blair's modern Britain, one aspect of this article was childhood poverty, with the depressingly real truth that 1 in 3 children growing up in Britain today are living in poverty. Some may argue that class barriers are not fixed (Saunders 1998) but recent research has shown that those that are socially disadvantaged from birth and the proportion who manage a long term escape from poverty is relatively small. Between 80 and 90 percent of those found at, or near the bottom of the income distribution in any one year are likely to be part of a persisting

poverty problem (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1998). “It is shown that poverty and disadvantage in childhood are precursors to educational and labour market failures in later life.” (Prout, 2000b:305).

Qualitative studies, especially with younger children are still very much in their infancy. Children’s own experiences and understanding of social inequalities has yet to be fully explored. Studies that have been undertaken show us quite clearly that children learn from a very early age the consequences of the material position of the family into which they have been born (Shropshire and Middleton 1999; Weinger 2000). In her study on middle-class and poor children’s views on economic status Weinger outlines this point very clearly. Children were shown photographs of three different types of housing one in a run down low income area, the other in a suburban ‘*well presented*’ area and the third photograph shown only to the middle-class respondents was an ‘*impressive mansion*’ [quoted from the original]. The children were then asked to respond to a series of questions relating to imagined families who lived in these houses. Middle class children’s responses projected that children from a poor background would be ostracised by their peers. The poorer children were able to communicate much more poignantly the emotional pain inflicted by social ostracism. For example children in the study spoke of “being made fun of if they didn’t have the right clothes...some people laugh at them...they feel like dying because they’re so poor” (p.139).

The middle class children also understood that poverty is an isolating condition but were able to remain detached from their feelings because they had not had direct experiences of it. The poorer children however were able to focus on the emotional

consequences of the isolation because they could connect emotionally with what it actually means as a real and lived experience. They had, it seems, internalised those feelings and these feelings then have to be another thing that is managed to ensure that somehow you fit in and portray a particular image of family life.

The poorer children in Weinger's study were able to align with the labelling that had taken place and often were able to identify with the characteristics that they were lacking in their own families. For example, financial good fortune, good manners and the idea that parents would "teach them a lot" (p.141). Less well-off children, also often defensively selected friends within their own class to avoid rejection or because they wanted to give support where it was most needed. It did not occur to middle class children in this research to befriend a poor child. It appeared that children were both well aware of the social chasm that deterred them from reaching out to each other in friendship.

If we link Weinger's work to Bourdieu's notion of habitus we can see evidence of children feeling reticent in reaching out from their current social position and their previous socialising networks. So middle-class children's responses reflected the fact that they didn't actually know a family that was poor could be an indicator that their friendship circles and social networks were located within a particular socio-economic framework. For example access to transport to attend certain activities or friends houses and being able to play in a garden are all likely to be determined by your family's economic assets (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). For both groups of children they were commenting often in very stereotypical ways but even if you allow for such stereotyping each group was connecting with their own experiences, resources and

histories to make their decisions. According to Weinger these children were bright and perceptive about social norms and have adapted to the unspoken but gripping rules of power and prestige linked to relative income. These rules limit their interactions from a very young age.

What the above study and other studies in this area such as Middleton *et al's*. (1994) work have done, is to identify for adults how early in life these divisions occur. These intense income inequalities are internalised by children at an early age which, ultimately undermine subsequent social bonds and the mutual understanding between social groups. Both Weinger's and Middleton's work alerts us to the disabling effects of living in poverty, as Gardner (2000) suggests, "For every talent that poverty has stimulated it has blighted a hundred" (p.11). This work is also reinforced by Shropshire and Middleton's (1999) work '*Learning to be Poor*' where they found that children in lone parent and income support families would either not ask for the birthday presents they really wanted or ask for a lower priced one because of a willingness on their part to caretake their parents feelings at not being able to provide the items they really wanted. The authors conclude in their study that for children living in poorer families they were learning and experiencing the economic world differently from their peers in other families. Not only did they have lower aspirations for their futures but also they have learnt to hide their disappointments at not having all the things their peers may have and as Shropshire and Middleton conclude "it seems that these children were indeed learning to be poor." (p.42)

'Education, Education, Education'

Having discussed the changing nature of children's lives over time particularly in family and household structures we can also see that significant shifts have occurred for children in terms of economic dependency and nowhere is this more prevalent than within the discourses of education. Children and young people, now arguably more than at any other time in history, face enormous pressures in order to secure the most basic of employment. Parental anxieties are very much focused on their children's future employment and career opportunities whereby they too are aware of the need for their children to gain qualifications to enable them to secure any form of employment. This increased credentialism is seen by parents to be a clear social shift compared to their own trajectories into the labour market when they left school (Jackson *et al.* 2000). Schools too are often under extreme pressure to do well in league tables, and contemporary mainstream educational institutions measure most if not all of their success in academic outcomes. Both the parents and school's anxieties, it could be argued, are all being channelled through the child's experience of the education system, often resulting in increased anxieties and tensions for young people.

In New Labour's modern Britain success is very much tied up within an education discourse that will ultimately relate to achievement in the labour market. What then if you are not academically inclined or you have other distractions impacting on your education? Are there other measures of success? Maybe for children and young people who are disaffected by the education system perhaps because of a lack of economic and cultural capital they use other forms of capital such as social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) to make a place for themselves in what is often a

hostile and unengaging world (Mayall, 1996). Perhaps one of the mediums in which children invest heavily of their time and energies is in their role as consumers. Through the acquisition of and use of material goods as signifiers of social status they are at some level able to transcend other barriers imposed on them. Skeggs (1997) argues that investing in consumption practices and certain leisure pursuits enabled working-class women to try and distinguish themselves from the negative labelling that is often attached to working-class lifestyles and culture. Women's consciousness of their classifications, and not seeing their class position as a positive identity, wanting to get it right and to escape shame humiliation and judgement often results in them aspiring to be, through certain practices and symbols middle-class. This could also be seen in the case of parents buying on behalf of children who also want to get it right to ensure their children do not have to experience those stigmatising feelings that they themselves have experienced.

Children as consumers

Young people's sense of identity is often seen to be grounded in material things that provide hard evidence of what they have in the world. Bourdieu suggests that cultural capital in the form of consumer goods offer children the kudos they want from their peers as well as reinforcing their own self-perception. 'Consuming' music, fashion, games and toys do at some level offer social currency through which young people can align with their peers to feel part of something or to belong as the discussion in Chapter 6 will illustrate.

The suggestion here is that children who are disaffected from the education message use consumer goods as a means of communication with their peers. It could be argued

that material goods are not only part of the language of consumption they are also a means by which children are able to connect with their peers in ways that they are unable to do in other settings for example through educational or familial discourses. Consumption then, is being proposed as an arena for children to communicate something about themselves to the world and more importantly to each other. As Lury (1996) points out, the social relationships of youth subcultures were organised around the peer group, and were as much collective as individual. Whilst we have seen a growing body of literature on youth lifestyles and in relation to youth consumption (Stewart 1992; Seabrook 1998; Miles 2000) there has not been the same growth within childhood studies. Within wider society it is almost as if a dichotomy has evolved for children where all things good equals education and all things bad equals consumption. This is particularly the case for play and leisure pursuits which appear to have been hijacked as a medium for educational development rather than pleasure and fun. There is a need to try and deconstruct the messages and pressures children are facing and to decode them accordingly.

“With all their purchases ahead of them, and with their ability to pull their parents along, children are the brightest star in the consumer constellation.”

(McNeal, 1998:37)

Academic research on the topic of the child as a consumer dates back to the 1950s however it was not until the mid-seventies that this work started to become established in psychological and marketing literature. Roedder John (1999) in her work looks back at 25 years of research on the consumer socialisation of children arguing that there are three stages that children progress through on their journey to becoming adult consumers. These three stages in the changes of how children think, what they know and how they express themselves as consumers are, perceptual (3-7

years), analytical (7-11 years) and reflective (11-16). Age is the primary factor driving the transition from one stage to the next. Children aged 7-11 fall into the analytical stage, according to Roedder John, which is an optimum stage of development in terms of their consumer knowledge and skills. There is a dramatic increase in their information processing abilities juxtaposed with a more sophisticated knowledge of the marketplace and a more complex understanding about concepts such as advertising (Roedder John 1999).

For 11-16 year olds there is an awareness of branding combined with an increased awareness of other people's perspectives as well as a need to shape their identity and conform to group expectations. Whilst this framework is useful for thinking about the developmental cycles that children may encounter, if we look at the evidence from the Tweenies phenomena there is a strong case to be made that children are experiencing these stages at a much younger age than Roedder John claims. Children's sophisticated understanding of the market as well as the market's positioning of certain goods has resulted in much younger children than Roedder John asserts being well aware of brand labels. She does however add the caveat that "virtually no studies exist with younger children on the topic of social and economic motives for consumption... especially those in the crucial 7-11 age period" (p.205).

Marketers have realised that children can and do make a difference to sales figures. As McNeal (1998) points out M&M confectionery became the top selling vending machine product once it was acknowledged that children were three feet tall and the machine makers lowered the coin slot accordingly. Arguing that children occupy three distinct consumer markets, primary, influence and future markets, McNeal suggests

the most skilled advertisers use this knowledge to sell simultaneously to more than one type of children's market. The primary market is where children spend their money on their own wants and needs. In the U.S. estimates show that children's aggregate spending roughly doubled in each decade of the 1960s, 70s and 80s but in the 1990s it has tripled (McNeal, 1998). The influence or 'kidfluence' market as McNeal labels it, is where children directly influence parents purchase choices and, this market, whilst harder to quantify in monetary terms, is growing as robustly as children's own spending. Many commodities now have a children's version whether it be snacks, toiletries or soft drinks. Supermarkets have a labelled children's section just for children's desserts alone and all forms of food has been downsized and packaged not only to suit children's palates but also to fit neatly into their lunchboxes. Children, according to McNeal, are even influencing the choice of family cars and advertisers have caught on to this idea and are now advertising family cars in children's magazines. As a future market McNeal suggests that children have more potential than their primary and influence purchases combined. Many companies are now investing in children as a means of securing their loyalty in the future. Arguing that the cradle to the grave marketing adopted by the market leaders such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola is a small expenditure risk for the companies but ultimately results in big returns in future merchandising. As McNeal concludes "A firm may not know what products it will sell in 10 or 20 years from now. But it does know that its name will be on them." (1998:40)

Advertising

“Give me a child at five, say the advertisers, and I’ll give you a consumer for life.”

(Bell and Garrett, 1996:1)

We live in a world that is heavily influenced by advertising and consumer culture. The Advertising Association has calculated that between 150 and 200 million pounds is spent every year to persuade children to want to buy a product. In general about one-third of all advertising expenditure goes on TV advertising but for child orientated advertising this rises to 90% (Euromonitor, 1988). Packaging and promotions also act as inducements to persuade children to buy certain products or use certain facilities. Almost all children’s breakfast cereals include items such as collectable toys to ensure repeat purchases. Fast food outlets such as McDonald’s and Burger King also offer enticements to children to buy their products in the form of collectable figures when purchasing their meals. Large multi-national corporations now have lucrative deals to ensure the rights to be able to sell particular products associated with popular films. The Star Wars phenomena that was experienced in 1999 was one example in a long line of acquiring the in-toy, or accessories associated with the film. An estimated 1.5 billion pounds was raised from the sale of merchandising from the film which was twice the projected box office takings for the film screening itself (Curtis 1999). Two years ago for the first time in the UK we experienced toy stores opening at midnight to ensure their Star Wars products could be sold without delay on their release date. A media hyped event maybe, but at midnight the queues of people were there eagerly waiting to make their purchase. The huge success of the much awaited ‘Harry Potter’ movie with all its supporting merchandising made this the latest in a long line of child-orientated commercial ventures and became the much sought after toy for Christmas 2001.

We also know that with the opening up of the marketplace children are now a distinct segment of that marketplace and companies now target children directly to buy their goods. Due to the advances in technology and increased use of home entertainment goods children are exposed to advertising messages earlier in their lives and for longer than previous generations. Many large supermarket chains now market to children specifically as a means of persuading parents to buy certain goods (Gunter and Furnham 1998). Middleton *et al.* (1994) demonstrate that children (particularly from working class groups) are very capable of exerting pressure over their parents to buy certain products or brands. Being able to exert pressure over parent's purchasing has been labelled by some advertising agencies as 'pester power'.

'Getting older younger'

In 1999 a television programme called 'Getting older Younger' looked at children as consumers and their role in the marketplace particularly from an advertising perspective. The programme makers illustrated how advertisers and marketing executives are well aware of children's ability to pester their parents into buying certain products. Many parents give into this pester power because they do not want their children to stand out from their peers or for their children to have feelings of marginalisation and the advertisers make full use of that knowledge. The Marketers in this documentary argued that children have by as young as 3-4 years developed quite a sophisticated understanding of products and product differences. They also concluded that children now are getting older younger as a result the many marketing messages they are exposed to. Children are aspiring to and wanting products that would have traditionally been marketed to older children and Britain is leading the way in this change in terms of fashion, music tastes and consumer goods generally.

This last point is interesting in terms of who is controlling whom. Some argue that advertisers stimulate demand and we are all compelled to consume whereas in this scenario the advertisers are suggesting that it is the consumer that is driving the changes. The brand director at Tammy the market leader in fashion for 9-15 year old girls argues that “children haven’t really changed but that adults have just begun to acknowledge them and give them what they want” (More, 2000:24).

Commercial strategies

Some companies have developed strategies whereby they try and maintain a family loyalty base to encourage parents to shop in their stores. Schemes such ‘Equipment and Books for Schools’ schemes operate whereby, depending on a minimum spend by the parents in their stores, they collect vouchers which local schools can trade for equipment, books and computers. According to Rosenbaum (1993) companies acknowledge that their motives are not entirely commercial because the schemes boost higher sales and arguably build customer loyalty. It seems that even these schemes are biased in favour of those schools whose catchment areas area have a higher wealth status. This is mainly due to the location of the store and a minimum spend required to get the vouchers. The main beneficiaries of the ‘Tesco Computers for Schools vouchers’ scheme (now in its eleventh year) have been from the Home Counties. For example in 1993 Essex schools and Hertfordshire schools received 299 and 242 computers respectively, Tyne and Wear accrued 13 computers and Cleveland just 5. In subsequent years stores have responded to these criticisms by lowering the minimum spend levels.

If we look at the strategies that multi-national companies adopt to ensure their message is targeted at children it seems clear that children can and do exercise more agency than we give them credit for. This can be seen both in terms of their own spending power and the indirect influence they have on their parents' purchases (McNeal 1998). It is highly unlikely that large multi-national companies who spend millions on research, product development and advertising are going to target children as a main source of persuasion and influence over parental decision making processes of brands/products if they are not going to yield high returns in their stores. Whilst trans-national companies do not completely control or dominate consumers they seem to be able, through advertising, to align products to individuals within the marketplace and at some level create meanings for products with which consumers will identify (du Gay, 1997).

Peer group culture and consumption

Consumer socialisation takes place within a social context including the family, the peers, the media and mass marketing (Roedder John 1999). As children age they expand their social relationships beyond their immediate family environment and as such the peer group culture is important to children and young people to enable them to gain a sense of belonging as well as identifying and interacting with other children (Corsaro, 1998; Erikson, 1963). Children's relationships within their families and amongst their peers makes for a complicated set of social relations as competing influences may impact on both family and peer group dynamics. In terms of identity peer support and communication, play a vital role in developing a personal and social identity (Coleman and Hendry 1990). Play is also a primary medium for the creation of social networks and of personal identity (Denzin, 1977) and consumer goods such

as toys and games are part of a shared culture amongst children and their peer networks. They are also according to Seiter (1993) both a means of social communication and they serve to strengthen peer group identification at an early age. Erikson (1963) observed that the dramatisation that takes place in play can also be a crucial dynamic in the maturational process, children can, through play learn to express and manage their emotions, which is why play is often a useful medium for therapy work with children. Aspects of children's material and symbolic culture such as hero[ine] worship through toys or media icons, and a sense of group identity are important attributes of children's cultures (Kline, 1993:18).

Initially children are steered towards other children by the friendship networks that their parents operate within (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). Once they enter nursery education and eventually formal primary education, (albeit entrance to these establishments may have been carefully selected by adults) children elicit their own friendships and social networks. These networks, however, do tend to be gender separate and the children are likely to be of a similar age, race and social class background (Hill and Tisdall 1997). Those first steps towards independence or time away from the family may be for some children a daunting and fearful process. They may seek in their adult caretakers and their peers outside of the home the emotional bonds and feelings of security they first established in families (Giddens, 1991). Progression through the education system provides temporal milestones in a child's life and is often a source of anxiety in the dissipation of some friendships and the emergence of new ones. Entry into the education system is however an inevitable part of maturation and their eventual immersion into a world that is totally separate from their earlier experiences of the familial home and to their eventual destination to the

position of adult. Throughout their journey to adulthood both children and their parents on their behalf want them to fit in, and it may be the case that in the minds of the parents and the child to be labelled an individual is the worst possible thing. Jackson *et al.* (2000) found in their research that parents are acutely aware of the amount of peer pressure that they consider their children to be under in today's society, a pressure more problematic than they experienced in their own childhoods.

It is not just toys and possessions that are important within younger children's friendship groups, clothing and fashion is also of importance in the minds of many children. Appearance and clothes form a common focus for teasing (Hill and Tisdall 1997). Children use name calling and insults to exclude or marginalise others, often it seems without any particular method or rationale. However the effects according to Butler and Williamson can be deep and lasting, "Name-calling grinds away. What's supposed to happen is you ignore them it's supposed to wear off, but it never wears off." (1996:54). Hill and Tisdall go on to assert that in order for children to conform to social norms of appearance and dress children subsequently adopt a range of strategies to minimise differences. Strategies such as dressing in a particular style or throwing away elements of packed lunches that may draw disapproval. In extreme circumstances, children may even keep secret major family difficulties such as separation or alcohol problems amongst adult members.

Children then it seems, want to fit in as much as possible. Brooke (1998) argues children don't want to be individuals and they 'slavishly follow any trend deemed hip' (quoted in Russell and Tyler 2001:13). This argument is supported by Spinks (2000) who suggests that peer group pressure means that children want to fit in at all costs. Spinx argues that teenagers may question more or even rebel, but for eight to

eleven year olds they take on media messages at face value and therefore she sees them as being more vulnerable to consumerist pressures.

In Chapter 2 I was suggesting that for many children who are disaffected from the education system, aspects of consumer culture gives them a sense of identity and something they may feel able to connect with. Smith (2000) takes a similar view and argues that for children on the margins of society the pressures to conform are more acute as their sense of inadequacy is easily awakened especially if they are not able to participate fully in all areas of social life. Conformity, Smith argues "...may be achieved through personal choice. Those with restricted choices however may find conformity becomes more compelling" (Smith, 2000:8). Marginalised children according to Smith seek recognition and acceptance as well as legitimation by being equal members of the consumer society.

It could be argued then, that for children consumption is a key determinant of their social standing for themselves and with their peers (Corsaro, 1998; Stewart, 1992; Seiter, 1993). Possessions in the form of consumer goods are often seen as being part of oneself and are increasingly related to overall self-esteem and well being (Gunter and Furnham, 1998). Added to this is the importance of celebrating significant festivals and events such as birthdays and Christmas whereby some children are receiving increasing levels of presents in many contemporary western societies it is possible to see why material possessions could be seen as being important in the lives of children. For parents too, being able to provide children with the presents that they aspire to are all part of what Belk and Coon (1993) suggest is the agapic (unselfish) love paradigm. This 'unselfish' gift giving is part of an expressive significance and

without an expectation of reciprocal obligations. Providing children with symbols at particular holidays and festivals has undoubtedly become central to a contemporary notion of childhood and this takes us into discourses of what it means to be a parent and to be able to provide your children with popular symbols of consumerism. As could be seen in Kempson *et al's.* (1994) study where parents on limited incomes demonstrated that the importance of giving children a happy time at Christmas was more important than avoiding debt and buying essential items for themselves. Much of Christmas giving and receiving is wrapped up with a notion of family and provides an expression of love (Belk and Coon, 1993). Children learn that often the withholding of a gift is also a withholding of love so as they grow they often conflate the giving of material possessions with the giving of love (Isaacs 1935). What needs to be established through empirical evidence is why parents go to inordinate lengths both economically and physically in terms of time and energy to buy their children the items they want and how it may be integral to what is seen as good parenting. Additionally how do children themselves understand and interpret what they receive at significant times of the year?

The 'gendering' of children's consumer culture

Brannen (1999) asserts "challenges still remain in analysing differences amongst children in particular how their childhood is shaped by age, race, class and gender." (p.150). Just as social class positioning is seen as a key aspect in this research project it is envisaged from other literature sources (Burman 1995; Gunter and Furnham 1998; Corsaro 1998; Rice 2000) that gender is going to be another fundamental issue in this study. Gender is seen to be of significance for both children's own views on how they position certain consumer goods and how they manage gender and consumption.

Additionally what roles men and women adopt in relation to consumption in their guise as parents is something that will be explored in the study.

Whilst gender and sex-role socialisation have become firmly embedded within the sociology literature little attention has been directed towards the issue of gender differences in consumer socialisation (Roedder John, 1999:205). What literature there is available does tend to focus on the inequality issues associated with girls (Russell and Tyler, 2001; Rice, 2000). Whilst there is an acceptance that girls are socialised amongst often male hegemonic structures the issues that relate to boys go largely undetected. This research will start to fill some of the gaps and try to identify from both girls' and boys' perspectives how they interact with the world of consumption and what their thoughts and feelings are to both the gender and social class dimensions of their material possessions.

Seeing gender as natural or given through biological differences is a standpoint that many parents adopt (Messner, 2000; Lowe 1998). Believing is according to Lorber (1994) seeing, suggesting that individuals selectively see aspects of social reality that back up their ontological perspective of the world. Stereotypical common sense notions of how gender is in the social world is an integral part of our shared beliefs as well as our social practices. They act as organising principles of identity construction and represent the powerful frame of reference in which children are brought up (Dittmar, 1992). Quoting Lunt and Livingstone, Dittmar concludes, "ideology, culture and practical experiences of inequality combine to produce different 'lenses' through which men and women view the world (p.128).

Because sociologically so little has been written on young children and their role as consumers it is very difficult to assess clearly what role 'gender' may play in children's aspirations and choices for certain possessions and how gender is played out between children. We live in a world where arguably more than at any other stage of the lifecourse children cannot 'do' childhood without 'doing gender.' This seems to be very much the case for younger children, when parents are vicariously choosing for their children how do parents for example, 'do' gender when they 'do' consumption? For children from the moment they take their first breath of life they are immersed in a culture of gendered symbols. The colours of their environment, their clothes and their toys as well as the language that is used to construct their worlds is gendered (Macguire 1991). Enculturation for children is an ongoing process and children make sense of their worlds from as much as what they see and sense as to what is directly said to them. " Much of the adult world is not consciously taught to children...but it is embedded in the language, discursive practices and the social and narrative structures through which the child is constituted as a person" (Davies 1989:4).

This research will try to identify what impact gender may have on children's relationships to consumer culture as well as how much agency young children can express in terms of what they wear, what they play with and how they interact with their peers. Younger children are very much the products of adult construction, assigned status and age related positioning through their clothing and their appearance. Gender is inscribed on children's bodies and reinforced through social norms and familial networks, schooling and the media. Children often challenge these ascribed characteristics and identities but their lack of power in relation to adults inhibits their ability to map out their own territory. Even the positioning of toys,

games and leisure pursuits are gendered. According to Farrell (1998) the mass toy market is one of the strongest early influences on gender with an unprecedented sexual division of toys defined by specific gender traits. Children are socialised into ideologically and culturally specific representations of masculinity and femininity and as Willis (1991) concludes commodity consumption is [itself] a vehicle for gendering.

The pressure by the media on children and teenagers is pervasive and amorphous but they do all at some stage of their lives and to varying degrees succumb to these pressures and as discussed earlier it is very important for them to fit in amongst their peers. Children through their exposure to television not just as part of family entertainment but because more and more children are having televisions for their own use in their bedrooms are being exposed to many messages via this media. It is estimated that the average child over their childhood will have spent over 20,000 hours watching television and only 11,000 in the classroom (Kline, 1993). So, television it seems is a powerful and engaging medium. Also, over the last decade there has been a shift towards creating a market for children's magazines as opposed to comics which focus on fashion, beauty, and popular television programme story lines. Additionally cult soap story lines are now transmitted when children get home from school with the perfectly honed heterosexual narratives running through them means that children arguably have become immersed in a much more adult sexualised world than in previous generations. Some media commentators themselves, suggest that having grown up in a 'media saturated society today' children have now become part of a huge and significant social shift that arguably occurred around the mid 1990s and has changed completely the traditional notions of childhood (Rice 2000). A key focus in both the age grading and positioning of children's consumer goods has

resulted in a specific segment of the market being created to accommodate children's needs. Children, now seen as a lucrative source of income to many multi-national companies have become a new segment in the marketplace and as such have been labelled as the Tweenies.

Tweenies

The distinct social and economic group now labelled by the marketers as the 'tweenagers', or tweenies as they were dubbed in the media, Rice (2000). More than just contemporary age grading this is about a niche in the market that the advertisers and the media have identified. Tweenies are primarily pre-pubescent 8-12 year old girls whose role models are Britney Spears, S Club 7, Westlife and who like to shop at New Look and Tammy. Academically this is such a new concept that very little has been published in childhood studies about this age group but the marketers and the media are aware of this shift in the age grading of consumer goods and have focused heavily on these new consumers.

A market worth £30 billion, arguably evolving directly from the Spice Girls phenomena in the mid-90s has placed tweenies front and centre of the consumer stage (Rice 2000). These young girls with their lack of traditional childish pursuits that have led to many media takes on the issue. Ellen (2000) goes one step further and suggests that "Year 2K children are on virgin turf...a psycho-sociological space [where] nobody else has ever been" (p.29). Others suggest "that young girls are now taking carefully planned routes in consumer culture" (Russell and Tyler, 2001:12).

Tweenies are not class specific but gender specific. Primarily tweenies are about girls and specifically it is about the construction of femininity based on corporeal and idealised versions inspired by the media. The only reference to boys are that they are “big on sportswear brands and techno-toys” (Rice 2000:24). This appears to be a social change in terms of contemporary notions of childhood directly linked to consumption and is somehow bound up within discourses of political and social moralising by many social commentators and parents.

What appears to be interesting about the tweenies is that they have allegedly emerged as part of wider social shifts. For example, journalists such as Rice (2000) writing for the Observer newspaper suggested that children’s increased wealth and disposable income levels have risen as a result of working parents. The perceived guilt working parents experience at not being able to spend as much time with their children as they would like tend to salve their anxieties by giving children more money and presents. Parents arguably have become cash-rich but time-poor (Rice 2000). Children that live in families where parents have divorced can potentially have two sources of income and presents as opposed to one, which undoubtedly increases their consumer power.

Some see this new life cycle position for children as the training period for what society values most which is the consummate consumer. Lamenting in a newspaper column Suzanne Moore says ‘We have all robbed our children of innocence’ (Mail on Sunday 01/04/01). The arguments and the political moralising surrounding the tweenies debate do, it seems, all too often end up with the idea that children need to be protected from all the ills of this alleged rampant consumerism and technological advances that appear to govern so many children’s lives. Children’s consumption

habits have according to Seiter (1993) become the focus for an anxiety that previously centred on working-class consumer habits in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Self-control and decadence are all according to Seiter the language used when discussing products such as mass market toys sold in large scale 'Toys r Us' type stores. Educational and quality toys escape this labelling as they are seen to be aspirational for future development. This is a good example of the dichotomous thinking discussed earlier of all things good being educational and all things bad being seen and portrayed as the negative pervasiveness of consumption into children's lives.

Living in a society where people appear to be concerned with economic status and where individuals are bombarded with advertising and messages about who and what they can be if they adopt a certain lifestyle choice or buy a particular brand it is difficult to see how anyone could escape this cycle of want. Children are very aware of these messages (Gunter and Furnham, 1998) and instead of expressing individuality they seem to conform to collective values and styles that offer them credibility amongst their peers. Consumer goods contribute to and reinforce patterns of socialisation, yet as Kline (1993) suggests "there is surprisingly little recognition of the mediating role [that] cultural objects play in children's development and generally no understanding of why possessions come to form such a part of the contemporary child's life. (p.15)

Concluding comments

It has been suggested in this chapter that there have been significant shifts in family structures, which will have consequences for all aspects of young people's lives.

Clearly there are some deep-rooted motivations for parents to go to inordinate lengths to ensure their children have certain commodities and symbols of current fashions and trends. I would suggest that this is not just about 'conspicuous consumption' but is much more complex and meaningful to both parents and children alike. There is a need to delve more deeply into the discourses that parents and children draw on in order to give a richer and more meaningful profile of both parents and children's attitudes and their beliefs about the world of consumer goods.

In contemporary western society we have seen a significant shift in children's social positioning evolving from an era where childhood in the lifecourse was characterised by social dependency, asexuality and the need for protection and training (Ennew 1986). There has also been a change in the sociological literature surrounding the social construction of childhood. New childhood studies have tried to address the complexity in children's identities whilst challenging the universalistic ideologies of childhood moving the debate on to one of the particularism of children's everyday lives (Silva *et al.* 1999). The tweenies and the lament for a loss of a particular type of childhood as well as the moralising by the media and at times adults has resulted in a shift in how the notion of childhood is perceived in wider society. We could argue that we are indeed back to a time and a place where children were only seen as different to adults by their size (Ariés, 1962). The valuing of the child as an emotional investment and asset (in many but not all cases), who is in need of protection in a risky and dangerous world creates a tension and a social dilemma in contemporary discourses of childhood. These tensions are not about the end of a childhood, as if there ever was a universal concept of childhood. What we are experiencing is what

Mayall (1996) describes as an era of changing childhoods that are negotiated through the lens of consumer culture.

Increased inequalities over recent decades have resulted in the amplification of what it means to be a full citizen in contemporary western society. The passport to that society it could be argued, is having the resources to consume. This research aims to gain a fuller understanding of what children's experiences of living in a society that is materially divided. This study will allow children as consumers to tell us as adults and researchers what role consumer goods occupy in their lives and what it means to them to be able to participate in a consumer based society. Children's increased position as a consumer in their own right is seen to be a particular threat to the social order by many social commentators and specifically for parents a negative consequence of wider socio-economic changes in an increasingly consumerist society (Jackson *et al.* 2000). Those working in the sociology of childhood studies have acknowledged that, "the diversification of children's lives, for example in terms of their family situation, the rise of consumerism with its heightened expectation of choice...the diffusion of democratic norms all these are creating new kinds of childhood and new varieties of children" (Prout, 2000a:7). My aim in the following chapters is to gain an insight into what those new kinds of childhood are by placing children at the centre of my research agenda. The specific methodological issues associated with undertaking this task will form the basis of the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Accessing childrens social worlds: research design

This chapter will outline the methodological issues that arose in designing and executing this research. Undertaking research with children can be problematic and the power dynamics that exist between the researcher and the researched are heightened by the additional power imbalance between the child and the researcher who also occupies the position of adult. Research methodologies also assume the competence and rationality of the research subject, which can be, in both theory and practice, a potential issue with children. Power differentials as well as matters of both consent and the ethical implications of undertaking research with young children are areas that are discussed in this chapter. I will also explore the dynamics, opportunities and problems connected with undertaking family based research. Finally the fundamental principle of being both reflective and reflexive is highlighted in relation to the many layers of the research project.

“...your children are not your children they are the sons and daughters for life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you and though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts.

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backwards nor tarries with yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.”

(Gibran,1921/1992:21).

Written at the beginning of the last century Kahlil Gibran's words illustrate my methodological standpoint as an adult researcher working with children. The idea that children have their own thoughts is a concept that we as adults often lose sight of in our beliefs and aspirations for children's futures. Research with children, as I pointed out in Chapter 1, is as much about notions of families and family life as it is about the research topic itself. All too often adults project their thoughts and feelings on to their children to portray a particular version of family life and often the children then become the conduit through which they try to rectify their own disappointments, anxieties and failures. Morrow and Richards (1996) argue that historically children's ideas have not been taken seriously and at a macrosocial level adults tend to trivialise and devalue children's acts as a matter of course.

Throughout modernity children in western culture have, until perhaps very recently, been seen but not heard. Adults such as parents and teachers, whilst often doing what they do for the very best of reasons, are arguably caught within the discourses of wider social, political and educational viewpoints as well as their own experiential views on child-rearing practices. What many adults seem to have lost sight of is the idea that children's qualitatively lived experiences are not necessarily what adults think their experiences of the world are and extracting those experiences is a major research task in itself. Although there have been shifts at an academic and a political level there are still huge areas both at a policy and a social level where children are still not afforded the freedom and autonomy to be heard. As Lansdown suggests "we simply do not have a culture of listening to children" (1994:38).

Researching Children

The positioning of children in wider society whereby they are seen as being vulnerable is just one of the dilemmas within the research process when trying to research aspects of children's lives. This notion of the child's helplessness is problematic in itself because it positions children as 'other' or incompetent, which as Morrow and Richards (1996) suggest, positions children, in turn, as the objects rather than the subjects of research. Children's perceived vulnerability often results in the choice of topic or area of research being seen as risky which is a challenging idea as these are often adults' constructs and may not in any way be a problem to the child. It could be the adult who has difficulties with certain topics but they may project those difficulties on to their child. As researchers we need to steer clear of the danger of "the research drawing attention to problematic situations that the child did not perceive as a problem in the first place" (Morrow and Richards 1996:98).

As I suggested in Chapter 4 over the last two decades sociology as a discipline has sought to transform the notion of childhood as 'natural' to one of childhood as 'cultural' (Jenks 1996). Part of that transformation has been to make children visible within a research agenda, like women in earlier sociological study children were seen as non-contributors to social wealth and have therefore traditionally been studied within the nexus of the family rather than as social actors in their own right.

'For many reasons...children have been the companions of women in the closet of political science...Children remain, with few exceptions, both silent and invisible-relegated to a conceptual space (which is presumed to reflect social reality) that has been declared apolitical. The political study of childhood remains in it's infancy'

(Elshtain, 1982:289)

Children's competencies are often seen by definition of their temporal relationships to wider social settings as being lesser than adults. Waksler (1991) suggests that adults would be better to see children as different rather than lesser and James *et al* (1998) offer a similar view in stating that children should be seen as having *different* competencies as compared to adults.

Although the concept of childhood has been on the sociological agenda for the latter half of this century, it has mainly been an adultist view of what is perceived to be children's understanding of their social worlds. Children (particularly pre-adolescents) are often placed at the bottom of the research hierarchy because of their lack of power base within institutions they occupy such as the family, education and health. Sociological research with children as opposed to behavioural, psychological or medical research is underdeveloped (Alanen, 1992; Qvortrup 1987). Social research agendas have slowly started to emerge whereby the social study of children is concerned with emphasising the importance of understanding children as social actors, for example, the ESRC 'Children 5-16' research programme. The fundamental premise that this programme has operated from has been to see "Children as social actors, achieved by examining children as active agents, influencing as well as being influenced by the worlds they live in, and/or through research which treats children as the primary unit of analysis" (Prout, 2000a:3).

Ethical Issues

Ethics and ethical issues arising within research design are often an adjunct at the end of a paper or a chapter but when undertaking research with children within any institutional or formalised setting ethics is always at the centre of the research agenda.

Children's perceived vulnerability and need for protection and the issue of informed consent means that the researcher needs to be clear that the child can understand what they are consenting to and are able to understand what may be expected of them. This was certainly the case for this project: the University's ethics committee requested additional information prior to ethical approval. Letters of consent for both the children and the parents had to be submitted for approval before the research was agreed.

How we view children's position in the wider social world is clearly going to affect the methods that are adopted and the interpretation of the data that is collected. As Morrow and Richards suggest, "in terms of methodology, researchers need to think carefully about the standpoint from which they are studying children, and the ethical implications of that standpoint" (1996: 100). A key standpoint in defining this research is therefore one that sees children as active social agents shaped by as well as shaping their wider social environments and who are more than capable of expressing their thoughts, opinions and feelings about varying aspects of their lives.

Sieber (1993) suggests ethics in research relates to "the application of a system of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to promote the good, to be respectful, and to be fair" (See Morrow and Richards 1996). The absolute base line according to Davis (1998) must be that the child is able to understand that they have the power to withdraw from the research at any time. The ethics of children's research can be divided into three broad areas, informed consent, confidentiality and protection. When undertaking research with children the researcher already finds themselves entering an ethical minefield. Do, for example, children fully understand

what is being asked of them? Within this research the children were given a consent form to read (Appendix A). After reading it the children were asked to explain what the letter said and what they thought it meant. Whilst it is not possible to fully identify what children have understood it is necessary to check out what children's understanding is at the start of the research.

This research topic would not seem on the surface to be ethically problematical. Neither would one perceive the topic to constitute a sensitive area of investigation. Issues did however arise that were not necessarily predictable at an earlier stage. Davis (1998) comments that children make their own decisions about whether to participate and identify themselves which issues are sensitive during the research process. As such children are likely to use silence, humour, conflict or even detachment as a means of resistance. One example of this was where one child I was working with became clearly distressed when the group was talking about their parents and the types of things they might buy for them. Observing his behaviour I noticed that he became withdrawn and remained relatively silent, and eventually stood to the side of the group with his hands in his pockets clearly distancing himself from the main group. It transpired from one of his peers who volunteered the information that his mother had left the family home. This clearly affected the discussions taking place regarding parents' roles within the consumption process. Whilst these discussions appeared relatively harmless on the surface, they had evoked difficult and emotional issues for this particular child. This was not necessarily something I could have predicted prior to undertaking the research. Therefore ethical considerations must be ongoing throughout the study and the researcher needs to be able to reflexively monitor the research process and to make adjustments as required. There is

a need to be sensitive to the interviewee's needs at all times but equally "to avoid asking questions because they are ethically difficult, thereby excluding children from research is an ethical problem in itself" (Morrow and Richards, 1996:103).

I am also mindful of the fact that the methodological aspects of undertaking research with children would constitute a thesis in itself but it is important to discuss the many thorny issues that I found myself grappling with at the various stages of this project. It seemed that many of the ideas discussed in other people's research especially relating to children's alleged emancipated social positioning did not equate to what I was seeing in the field. The positioning of children as active social agents; a fundamental for some people working in this field perhaps, was, however, in other areas met with some disdain and in some cases rejected completely out of hand. But, undeterred I carried on recognising the significance of Gibran's words "[do not give them] your thoughts...for they have their own thoughts" (p.21).

Younger children like all other social actors must be researched in the context of the wider social structures in which they live whilst ensuring that the research remained as child focused as is practicable. My aim was to keep the children at the centre of the project at all times and not let their voices get lost in adult's concerns and opinions. Interviewing the parents was a useful (and as it turned out an incredibly beneficial) means of closing the loop on the consumption cycle. I was however aware that, for younger children especially, they are heavily imbued by parental beliefs and value systems. As parents were the 'ultimate' purchasers of consumer goods for their children, it meant that there would be a need to talk to parents as a context for the narratives of the children. As I will discuss in Chapter 6 my initial projections about

the power dynamics between parents and their children, on the acquisition of children's material possessions were certainly challenged.

Power dynamics and the research process

When interviewing children there is a double-bind in terms of the power imbalance firstly, between the researcher and interviewee and secondly between the adult and the child. Whilst the ideal would be to neutralise all power imbalances, Alderson (1995) suggests that the research either reinforces the imbalance or questions it. On the same subject, Mayall (1996) argues that it is inescapable that children will not be affected by the inequalities between them and the researcher. Many social researchers have grappled with this thorny issue. All researchers have been children and experienced an experiential framework constructed through a notion of childhood. Therefore we arrive as adult researchers with our biographies that have been built upon our experiences and filtered through the lens of a notion of childhood (Mayall 1994; Thorne 1993). Whatever methodological standpoint you adopt within the research process at some point "...children have to leave their interpretation of their own [thoughts] to another age group whose interests are potentially at odds with those of themselves. This is a sociology of knowledge problem, which so far is almost unexplored." (Qvortrup, 1994:6).

One solution that is offered to the epistemological positioning of children is to take the 'least adult role' (Mandell, 1991) which suggests that the researcher distances him or herself from the position as adult in all aspects of their role other than their physical size. James *et al* (1998) however argue that researchers do not need to necessarily try to take on the role of a child but should aim to be friends with the children they are

working with. However, I am inclined to agree with Harden *et al* (2000) who suggest that we should be cautious when trying to befriend our research participants as friendship is usually a relationship between equals and this can rarely if ever be the case within a research framework. To eradicate generational differences between adults and children is not possible within the research setting (Mayall 2000). What Mayall suggests is that there is a need to work with generational issues rather than just to downplay them. What Mayall asks for as a researcher is for children “through their own unique knowledge... to help her as an adult to understand childhood” (p.122). Jenks (2000) however takes a much more definitive stance when he concludes that researchers are always adults and they are always different to children because they are socially clustered in generational forms (p.70). From my perspective I had tried to adopt Mandell’s ‘least adult’ role. This was certainly the case in terms of the authority role and dynamics that exist between teachers and children. I did however, want to engage with the children on the basis of, as Mayall (2000) suggests, them helping me as an adult to understand more fully what their experiences as children were in relation to consumption.

The children themselves do however have an expectation of you as an adult in a school setting and this became clear to me when one group of Year 6 boys were unhappy with a member of their group’s behaviour within the group. Frederick said to me before Tom arrived “You need to make Tom leave the group ‘cos he’s not taking it seriously enough.” I was quite phased by this because I had carefully planned that I would not enter in to any authority role and did not want to exert any type of power over any of the groups. Having gathered my thoughts I replied “I can’t do that Frederick, but as a group you could ask Tom to take it more seriously or to leave the

group.” Frederick was quite thrown by my response and protested about why Tom should not be allowed to remain in the group. I then asked Gilbert, who was the other group member what he thought about Tom’s presence in the group to which he replied “oh leave it Frederick, he’s not doing any harm.” The boys argued about it but because of my refusal to tell Tom that he had to leave, Tom remained in the group and my ‘least adult’ role had remained intact.

A qualitative framework

In line with previous research undertaken in this area and the pilot study for this project there was a need to think carefully about which methods would yield sufficient data. Furthermore, there was a need to take into account the cognitive differences between the two age groups, which, clearly could in theory be vastly different. Qualitative methods were seen to be the optimum way of assessing meaning and would also be flexible enough to accommodate the age and cognitive differences of the children participating.

Ethnographic methods are a particularly useful medium for engaging with children and albeit temporarily provide the opportunity to engage with how children construct, discuss and make sense of differing aspects of their everyday lives. Using focus groups and other visual task based methods which, are now seen as a positive way of engaging effectively with children (Prosser 1998), would enable the data to be located within a wider sociological framework but without losing its child-centric view. Engaging children in ‘task-centred activities’ which exploit children’s particular talents may be a more useful way of allowing children to express their ideas and thoughts rather than using questionnaire and interview methods (James *et al.* 1998).

In practical terms when working with younger children a range of creative methods are often required to sustain interest and to appeal to the methods of communication that many children are familiar with and enjoy using (James *et al.* 1998; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Hill *et al.* 1996). Using a creative and an intra-method approach also offered children the freedom to explore and express their own ideas on a topic whilst having the reassurance of their peers within the group who are working with them at the same time. Additionally I wanted to minimise the risk of bias by being overly reliant on one type of data collection (Morrow and Richards 1996).

A qualitative approach also provides a useful means of addressing personal meaning. Such an approach is also appropriate if the researcher needs to target the data to the interviewees particular interests, for example if the need arose to explore a specific rather than a general point. Whilst this may also be seen to be a weakness in terms of accuracy and validity, it is recognised that all methods of research are open to interviewer bias (Morgan 1997). In the context of my research I took an interpretivist approach: the initial aim being to understand the social world from the perspective of the child living, negotiating and understanding the structures that they operate within.

Validity and Reliability

Adopting qualitative methods as a means of enquiry into the social worlds of others has however, traditionally left the researcher open to issues of bias and the problem of subjectivity and interpretation and these concerns need to be addressed in the early stages of the research project. There are also issues of inclusion and exclusion of such large amounts of data in the finished project. Implicit in these criticisms is that data yielded from qualitative methods are not scientific or valid. Validity and reliability are

key elements in the research process as qualitative methodology relies heavily on interpretation. de Vaus (1996) suggests that interpretation is another problem associated with developing valid indicators of the meaning of people's responses. Mahon *et al.* (1996) suggest that adults such as parents and teachers cannot give valid accounts of children's social worlds. In work they had undertaken with lone mothers the mothers were well aware that their child had very different feelings towards the absent parent than the mother and that they often concealed those feelings. This was done so as not to open up conflict or to be disloyal to their mother's feelings by being seen to want contact with their father. Valid accounts of children's attitudes and experiences can only really be obtained by talking directly with the children. This is very much the perspective that feminists adopted when they argued that much of what we knew about the social world was indeed a male construct. This subsequently meant that when women entered the research arena different methodologies emerged that were seen to be more suited to describing and understanding the diversity and complexities of many women's lives.

Reflexivity

Considering both the research topic and the ontological positioning of the researcher is a key part in the researcher reflexively monitoring their own position as the researcher as well as the research process itself. Arguably it is better to acknowledge bias rather than to hide behind a mask of objectivity (Cooper and Stevenson 1997). In a discipline such as sociology how can we have lived and continue to live and engage in a similar world to those that we research and not adhere to certain values or hold beliefs about why things may be as they are? As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out "social researchers are part of the social world they study" (p.16). Trying to

isolate data that is uncontaminated by the researcher is according to Hammersley and Atkinson a futile exercise; in as far as all data involve theoretical pre-suppositions.

The whole concept of aspiring to or achieving a value-free sociology has caused considerable debate since the advent of the social sciences. Arguably we all have a linguistic currency of values and values are certainly difficult to define universally. Some values may be moral and open to subjectivity but even a value that can be measured in monetary terms may still be interpreted in different ways. Weber (1949) argued that social science should and could be value-free, the key for Weber was in *Verstehen* sociology where we can understand values without making value judgements. Weber believed that it was possible to acknowledge the value system at the heart of the research but still have the ability to put personal values on the subject to one side.

The real issue as to what role 'values' may or may not play in any research project I would suggest is for the researcher to be clear about their own value bases compared to those people you may be researching, where your boundaries lie and where the interviewee's boundaries may be at any given point in the research relationship. This can be achieved by being open and reflexive about your methods and the intent of your research agenda. The concept of reflexivity is a critical part of the qualitative research process and many researchers (particularly within feminist methodologies) acknowledge that our subjectivity is part of our biography which, we cannot externalise or escape from (nor should we want to). The important issue is to be aware of it and to reflect on our own practice (Stanley, 1990). Arguing persuasively, Lather (1995) suggests that reflexivity and critique are the two essential skills which need to

be developed on the journey towards cultural demystification. “Research which encourages self and social understanding...requires research designs that allow us as researchers to reflect on how our value commitments insert themselves into our empirical work” (p.301). In the role of researcher we never enter the research from an uncontaminated perspective. Our experiences, our gender, social class position and our ethnic origins will have all been constructed within the social and cultural discourses available to us in the society that we live. Our role(s) and identities as adults have been created through a particular experience of childhood all of which, shapes our understanding of others. This last point seems particularly pertinent within a discipline such as sociology and arguably means that we have to be questioning our thoughts, decisions and interpretations on the data that we collect. Having considered the methodological framework and the most suitable methods with which to gather my data I needed to undertake a pilot study to test out my methods in the ‘real world setting.’

Pilot study

A pilot study was undertaken a few months prior to the main study. The main concern of the pilot study was to test the effectiveness of my methods rather than reflecting the stratification of the eventual sample I needed. In total 18 children and four parents participated in the pilot study. The strongest themes from the children’s perspective in the pilot study was that toys and games were part of a shared culture and were used as a medium for communicating and interacting with their peers. Many of the children were aware of as they perceived it a shortage of money at home but they did not seem to be very astute at understanding the true costs of particular items. Daniel for example, stated that if he did not get a computer for his birthday he would just save up

and buy one. All the children knew what strategies to adopt to get particular items that they wanted (pester power). Toys and games also tended to be separated out through gender. For example, most of the boys listed a Playstation as their favourite toy or game. The girls rarely mentioned games consoles but if they did it was to illustrate how they were excluded from certain conversations in break times because they did not participate in this type of play activity. Children's favourite possessions were also stratified by gender, for example, the girls focused heavily on clothes and fashions. Many of the girls talked about clothes as a favourite possession whereas the boys only mentioned clothes in relation to the function that they served. For example, what they would wear at school as opposed to what they wear to play football in. The affective aspect of consumption seemed important to the children in that they often made links between their favourite things and the person that had given it to them such as a grandparent. The majority of the children thought they could be more persuasive in getting their mother to change their minds in allowing them to have certain toys and games than their father. Several children also mentioned using alternative tactics such as either asking grandparents or doing extra chores if their mother was not responding to their repeated requests.

One problem that did occur within the pilot study was what seemed like a reluctance on the part of the younger children (7-9 year olds) in particular to answer questions on an individual basis. They seemed to be looking for reassurance and often appeared to be wanting to give me a 'right answer.' The older children (10-11) seemed to be much more relaxed and open to the questioning. Discussions with other researchers working with children of these age groups suggested that it may have been too intimidating for the younger children to work on an individual basis with a relatively unknown

researcher. For the main study I concluded that Hood, *et al.* (1996) were right to suggest that the social mismatch between the adult interviewer and the child subject may be lessened when they participate as a group with their peers.

The majority of the parents in the pilot study were on income support and so in the main parents stated that the cost of a particular item was the key determinant as to what they would or wouldn't buy for their children. All of the parents were aware of a pressure to buy particular brands or labels. Most of the parents felt that television advertising closely followed by peer pressure influenced their children's requests for particular toys and games. The advertising link was particularly noticeable at Christmas time when the intensity of the advertising seemed to increase. A very strong theme that emerged from the pilot study with the parents was how much they reflected on their own childhood experiences as a measure for how they wanted their own children to experience and remember their childhood in later years. Parents offered emotive examples of their own experiences over twenty years ago and this was undoubtedly having an impact on their decisions as to what memories they wanted their children to hold on to. This notion whereby parents were reflecting back on their own childhood's was something that I decided to explore further in the main study.

To enable me to adopt an effective multi-method approach to my research questions undertaking a pilot study was crucial. Some problems were highlighted in the pilot interviews that needed to be addressed prior to undertaking the main research. The pilot study was on reflection, an invaluable means of testing out the methods I wanted to use and ensured the methods I was using would yield the data I required.

The Issue of consent

Having reflected on the pilot study and thought about the most appropriate methodological framework required to undertake my research I needed to identify specific areas to work within to ensure my sample would reflect the stratification profile I was looking for. This also meant that I was reliant on the schools being located in particular areas. Head teachers initially had to be written to and they often have the power to accept or reject my request without any consultation (Hood *et al.* 1996). Headteachers then pass on the request to class teachers after which parents were written to and then and only then could the children themselves be asked if they were prepared to be part of the study. Whilst it is acknowledged that access to children's views must be monitored in some way, the current system (if the researcher opts to use an institutional setting to carry out the research) where the child is placed at the bottom of the hierarchy rather than the top does send out a message to children about their 'place' in the social order. As Becker (1966) states "...in any system of ranked groups, participants take it as given that the members of the highest group have the right to define the way things really are." (p.67). Having wanted the children to be kept at the top of my research agenda at this very first stage of my research schedule they had temporarily plummeted to the bottom of the agenda in amongst all the adult gatekeepers.

When working with young children the whole issue of consent is entirely problematic mainly because of the many levels of gatekeepers that have to be encountered before you can even ask a child if they want to be part of a project (Hood *et al.* 1996). Can children really say 'yes' when they are hardly ever allowed to say 'no' to adults? How

as researchers can we be sure that children fully understand what the research process requires of them. It is not simply chronological age that determines children's competence. Thompson (1992) suggests that "children from a surprisingly early age can understand the basic elements of the research process and their role within it if this information is presented in an age appropriate manner." (p.60). There is still also the predicament that if parents say no to their children's participation children themselves cannot say yes.

"Young children are assumed to be 'incompetents,' incapable of cognitive complexity...beliefs about children's supposed incompetence among academics, policy makers, practitioners and the general public. These beliefs can mean that children have no option but to take part in research, or be excluded from it, if their parents or other adults with authority so decide."

(Alderson, 1995:77).

This was an issue for several children who did want to be part of the project but whose parents had not signed consent forms. I had one child who wanted to be part of the study but could not get her mother to sign the consent form and ended up following me around the school eventually pleading with me to let her neighbour sign the form as her mother was not well enough to sign the form for her.

Identifying 'class' within a class of children

Having conducted my pilot study and adjusted some of my methods in light of the data generated from this preliminary study the next thing was to organise my sample in relation to the socio-economic groups I needed to work with. To enable me to answer some of my research questions and to understand the possible differences in consumer patterns between different social class groups I had to ascertain how best I could identify children's relative socio-economic position to ensure I would be

reaching a broad base of children. A range of measures are used to identify adults' social class grouping, but there are often problems in identifying children's positioning particularly if they have two parents living in separate households. The majority of children in lone parent households in Britain live with their mothers and it is women who financially, consistently fare worse than men in the break-up of the family unit so their relative position can change dramatically once their familial circumstances change (Social Trends, 2000).

Since the post-war period in Britain large amounts of data have been collected on the measurement and understanding of poverty and deprivation in Britain. Several methods are used to measure the extent of poverty such as the income of the household, being dependent on state benefits or lacking certain goods and services which are believed by a majority of the population to be essential (Mack and Lansley 1985). Having reviewed the methods for the purposes of my research it was decided that using indices of deprivation (Nelder and Maconachie, 1997) provided the most appropriate means of identifying areas that would provide me with a suitable sample population.

Having chosen indices of deprivation as the appropriate measure to reflect the stratification I was looking for I then needed to identify local areas that needed to be targeted. Two areas were chosen in the Southwest of England based on deprivation scores at neighbourhood level within the area (Nelder & Maconachie, 1997). Having looked at four different indicators of poverty The Breadline Britain Score, The Townsend Material Deprivation Score and the DOE Index of local conditions and The Jarman Underprivileged Area Score, the Department of Environment (DoE) index of

local conditions (1991) was chosen. The DoE index of local conditions was preferred because it provided a general index of urban deprivation and also looks at other indices such as material and social deprivation. The two areas chosen had either a very low deprivation indicator on either a single or a combined measure or a very high score, the area identified as having a high deprivation indicator was chosen because it ranked in the three most deprived neighbourhoods on every measure. The socio-economic profiles of the areas are indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Area Profiles of East Street and West Street

Area	Population	% of Pop. receiving Income Support	Average % Locally	Average % Nationally	Indices of Dep. (Rank) 2000	Child Poverty Index score
East Street	12,400	19	9	8	249	77.28
West Street	17,500	5	9	8	5025	22.85

(Source National Statistics, 2001).

The East Street area which had a high deprivation score, has a population of 12,400 people and accounts for five percent of the population of the city as a whole. 19% of the resident population were in receipt of income support compared to an average 9% for the area and 8% for Great Britain overall. The indices of deprivation 2000 gave this ward a rank of 249 out of a total of 8414 English wards (National Statistics, 2001). Within the local area East Street had a ranking of 1 (1 being the most deprived) on two of the measures and a ranking of 2 and 3 on the remaining two measures. The

child poverty index scores show the percentage of children 0-16 in that ward who live in families that claim means tested benefits in the East Street area the figure is 77.28. The West Street area has a resident population of 17,500 people with 5% of the resident population claiming income support. Their ward rank was 5025 out of a total of 8414 English wards and their child poverty index score was 22.85.

No children from ethnic minority groups participated in the study. Whilst there were children from minority groups in some of the schools overall the city as a whole has a very low level of ethnic minority groups 0.9% of the population (Census data 1991) with an ethnic minority population in East Street of 1.08% compared to a population in West Street of 0.64%.

Sample

The children were split into two age groups 7-8-year-olds (year 4) and 9-11 year olds (year 6). The groups were decided based on children's friendships groups in the classes they were in within the school. The ages were seen to be most relevant because as discussed in Chapter 3, Roedder John's (1999) work identifies 7-11 years of age as being the optimum stage of development in terms of their consumer knowledge and skills. There was a need to explore with children what their relationship was with their peers, their parents and the world of consumption. Finally, as I pointed out in Chapter 4 children in this age group have been overlooked or remained invisible in this aspect of both empirical work and the sociology of consumption literature thus far.

All children were interviewed in school time after written parental consent had been established forty-five children ranging from 7-11 years-of-age participated in the study. Twenty-four girls and twenty-one boys between the two schools subsequently gave written consent to be part of the research, the breakdown by year and gender is detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Breakdown of Children’s Sample by School Year and Gender

	EAST STREET	WEST STREET
Year 4	9	9
Year 6	11	16
Girls	9	15
Boys	11	10

(n=45)

Data Collection

Once the sample areas had been located, ethical issues considered and both access and consensual agreements had been established by all parties involved I was at the point of commencing the fieldwork. Having reflected on methods used in the pilot study undertaken earlier in the year I had refined and honed my research design and went about collecting data from the two areas chosen for the main study.

A week before my visits to the school I went in to meet the children who would be participating in the research. At this stage the children were given a diary to complete (Appendix B) regarding their activities from Friday afternoon (after they had finished

school) until Sunday evening. Going in to give out the diaries and meet the children meant that both the children and I could start to get to know each other. I was also able to answer any questions or worries they may have had about being part of the research. They had been given letters of consent to be part of the research and at our initial meeting they were reminded that they had the right to change their minds about being part of the project at any time. I went through the layout of the diaries with the children giving them a free rein as to how they completed them. The aim of the diaries was to give a snapshot of how their leisure time was constructed and what differences may occur (if any) in their social activities. I did not want to be prescriptive in terms of how the children should complete their diaries. I wanted their interpretation of their time and the completion of the diary to be meaningful to them. I was also wary of offering them methods for completing the diaries that I as an adult would assume a child would enjoy doing. For example, Backett *et al.* (1991) found that children's limitations in their drawing ability shaped what they said in their finished work. As it transpired most children adopted a mixture of drawing and text to illustrate their weekend leisure time.

The majority of the children at West Street completed the diaries on time and turned up with them as agreed on the Monday morning whereas for many of the children at East Street School the diaries were still being returned at the end of the week. There was a significant difference in both the way that the diaries were completed as well as the range of activities that were listed. For example, 87% of the children that participated in the study at West Street School (more affluent area) completed and returned their diaries compared to 60% at East Street School (less affluent area).

Having decided that I was not going to enter in to teacher mode and keep asking the children for the diaries back, interestingly the children themselves took on the monitoring role for the return of the diaries. They did this by reminding other children to bring in their diaries the following day if they had forgotten them. The completion of the diaries varied dramatically between the two schools. Generally West Street children filled them in methodically and carefully with a creative range of textual and visual methods adopted. In the East Street area there were also examples of creativity but there tended to be gaps where sections had been missed out. They seemed to start well but the energy and enthusiasm appeared to have fizzled out by the end of the weekend period. Also in the East Street area one mother had taken over the completion of the diary because she had felt that the child had not done the job thoroughly enough. So after writing a short statement at the beginning of the diary she had then proceeded to elaborate on all of the entries and to emphasise things that had been missed out or that the parent clearly thought should have been included. There was, apparently a picture of this child's leisure time that this parent had wanted to portray.

Schools were identified as the optimum way of accessing the numbers of children (within the specified age ranges and gender) required for the project. The disadvantage of using schools is the difficulty with the availability of space as well as the privacy and noise issues (particularly when you are audiotaping sessions) and the hierarchies that exist within them. This is a big problem in many primary schools and is an issue that I will come back to later. The other difficulty in using the school environment is the children do assume that you have some kind of teacher status. However, I do agree with Mauthner (1997) that the locale of the school is better than the family home

where privacy is even more of an issue and children's responses are often screened by or prompted by parents who want to give what they perceive to be the 'right' impression.

As a woman researcher working in an educational setting (especially at primary school level) the interaction between the child and the researcher has to be reflexively monitored to ensure the children do not position you in the role of both teacher and or mother figure (Mauthner, 1997). On this basis and to counteract some of the power imbalance that exists I asked the children to call me by my first name. This proved very problematic as the children frequently lapsed into calling me 'miss', which is how they address their female teachers. They would see me in the corridor and say "miss, miss is it going to be my turn today?" It took days to try and establish this practice and I eventually realised that what I was trying to do was actually resocialise them, children are usually not allowed to call adults by their first name and certainly not within the school environment. The teachers struggled with the concept themselves, even after I had carefully introduced myself to the teacher by my first name only they would often talk to the children about me by addressing me as 'Mrs. Evans' they too, it seemed had problems in allowing the children the freedom to communicate with an adult on an egalitarian basis.

Focus groups

In my first week at the school focus groups were established, the children chose their own groups and where possible these were based on their friendship circle. Generally these groups were gender differentiated by the children's choice of group members rather than through selection by the researcher. The age range was small, keeping the

age range to a minimum and separating out genders are important considerations when working with children. Boys arguably talk more and more loudly than girls and often resort to disruptive strategies if they are not getting the attention they desire (Greenbaum 1987; Hill 1992; Mauthner 1997). Another benefit of opting for focus groups is that interviewees can often spark ideas off each other and sometimes hearing other people's thoughts and opinions help the individual focus his or her own thoughts.

Having identified my research methods the two key preliminary activities that took place for each group of children was to get them used to what was required of them and to organise an icebreaker. The children at this stage chose pseudonyms. Children tended to choose 'Popstar' names such as 'Britney' or the names of their favourite footballers which can be problematic when you have over forty children all wanting the same pseudonym. It does however offer an insight as to the types of people they like to be identified with and the images and personalities that appeal to them in their everyday lives. The aim of the first part of the session was for the children to tell me the three favourite things that they owned. Once they had done this they then had to say which one of the three was their most favourite item i.e. if their house was on fire and they could only keep one thing what would it be? The aim of this question was for children to give an indication as to the numbers of and type of things that were popular across their friendship and social groups. Also asking them why these things were important to them was seen as central in trying to ascertain the meanings placed on material possessions by children. Children were also asked at this stage if they received pocket money and from whom. This question was asked to try and determine what levels of disposable income they had. Asking children about pocket money was a

way of identifying if that money was given unconditionally or conditionally. For example, did they have to earn money by fulfilling certain tasks at home? The children were also asked if they spent or saved their pocket money to ascertain whether there were different attitudes to the acquisition and use of money by age or gender and between children from different social class backgrounds.

Each child participated in three different activities. The aim was to uncover constructs about the meaning and use of material possessions in their relationships with adults and other children and their motivations to own certain items. The main focus for these discussions was to elicit an understanding of a child's experiences and perspective as a lived experience now rather than how as adults we often look back and remember things. Through their discussions with their peers children are actively making sense of their lives and the wider social world in which they live. Children it seems can help with the social presentation of other children by offering a 'collective' account of how they view their lives (Mayall 2000). Small groups also help to neutralise the power imbalance that there may be between a one to one interview with an adult researcher and a child (Mahon *et al.* 1996; James, 1999). When working with children on an individual basis children assume that there is a 'right' answer. For most children issues and ideas are either right or wrong. They are educated certainly in their early years for example, that there is a right or wrong way of spelling words and that $3 \times 2 = 6$. Mahon *et al.* (1996) suggests that the researcher is seen as the expert and they then try to give answers that they think the expert wants to hear. In the pilot study there was evidence of this particularly for the younger children. There was an expectation that I was looking for a 'right' answer. The whole idea that I was just asking them to tell me their opinions, thoughts and feelings around certain areas of

their life seemed fairly alien to them. Children's questioning of their progress or seeking reassurance that they are 'doing it right' highlights the "hierarchical relations that already exist between adults and children and in particular between teachers and pupils at school" (Christensen and James 2000:166).

Whilst it would be foolish to think that your presence as an outsider is forgotten the children did in the context of this research enter their own worlds of discussion, negotiations, thoughts and feelings for extended periods. Whilst children are discussing ideas with each other it could be argued that this allows the researcher a snapshot into their lives and their worlds as they live it and negotiate their individual pathways through it. As Mayall (2000) asserts children can help "adults tap into one of the means whereby, through talking with each other, children firm up knowledge and learn more about aspects of their social worlds" (p.133).

Focus groups are also useful when ideas and concepts need to be developed throughout the interview. The comparisons that individuals make about their experiences for example are a valuable source into complex behaviours and motivations (Krueger & Morgan, 1993). It is recognised however that for some children having to speak out within a group can be difficult, and for some areas of research the nature and sensitivity of the topic may inhibit participation. The researcher must therefore monitor the group and try to be aware of individuals who may be distressed, shy or withdrawn from the discussion.

There are advantages and disadvantages with all research methods and group work can create problems. For example, some people may be less willing to say things in a

group than they would on an individual basis, some members of the group may dominate the discussion or conversely may not participate at all. There are also difficulties in recording sessions and this is particularly problematic with children who often all want to speak at the same time. This was an issue that arose within this project but was something that given time the children adapted to. Group composition may also affect the quality of the data generated (Sarantakos, 1998). As I suggested earlier in this chapter having used individual interviews for some of the work in the pilot study I did find that for the younger children in particular they appeared to see this process as intimidating. After careful consideration of what worked well in the pilot study and contact with other researchers I decided that due to the age, the power imbalance within the research setting and the research questions I wanted answering that small groups, whilst having some limitations were the better option.

Rewriting the end of a story

When I embarked on this research one of the difficulties that lay ahead of me was identifying children's own taste and expressions. 7-11 year old children who have no independent income of their own are to some extent an integral part of their parents' lifestyle, taste and expression. Would younger children therefore, be fairly compliant with their parents' choices and decisions rather than the behaviours adopted in their more rebellious stage as they progress into adolescence? Although children can and do influence their parent's decision making in terms of shopping, Hill (1992) concludes that some children are able to make decisions about how to spend their money, but these decisions are only partial. Therefore one could argue that all I was going to find were parent's motivations and aspirations simply projected onto their children rather than being able to identify children's own expectations, attitudes and beliefs.

As well as trying to identify whether children could express agency over their parent's decisions to buy or even not to buy various consumer goods another theme that needed to be explored in light of previous work in this area was to try and identify how children negotiated with adults to buy certain things. I wanted to ascertain whether there was any evidence of children themselves being able to overturn parental decisions in relation to the consumption of particular material possessions. In short, are children just passive recipients of their parents' values and ultimate choices about what goods and leisure pursuits children will participate in? To facilitate this process a pictorial vignette was used whereby the children were given a short story (Appendix C), which was a dilemma about two friends who really wanted their mother to buy particular item(s) which she considered to be a waste of money. The children themselves chose what those item(s) might be and they then had to rewrite the end of the story by discussing with their peers what strategies these two friends could adopt to convince or persuade their mother to change her mind. This method was popular particularly with the Year 4 children and most of the children, whatever age, were able to identify a time when they had been in a similar position and spoke very clearly about the mechanisms they had employed to get what they wanted. Children participate enthusiastically and the use of vignettes, story writing and draw and tell techniques helped engage and sustain their interest (See Hill *et al.*1996).

Semi-structured group interviews

The final exercise that the children completed was to explore a range of themes relating to the wider process of consumption (Appendix D). For example was it important for them to have the same toys, games and clothes as their friends? Did they

think that all children had the same amount of things given to them? What might children feel if their parents could not afford to buy them certain things? How do they decide what things they would like? How easy or how difficult was it for parents to buy them the things that they have? All these questions were themes that were developed from the earlier pilot study and encompassed a range of issues that would address the affective dimension of children's consumption profiles which currently remain unaddressed within the children and consumption literature.

All of the activities were audio-taped and this was done for three reasons. Firstly: to ensure that I could keep track of the sessions, depending on the children's mood, the agenda of the school on any given day and the personalities of the group. Second: it often needs quite a lot of skill to 'manage' (I use the word manage tentatively because I don't want it to be misconstrued as a hidden power dynamic) the sessions, and keep the topics interesting and engaging enough to sustain the younger children's interest. Third: to leave a traceability element on the children's responses as well as the way the interviews are conducted. This also removes the temptation to clean and tidy the data (Kitzinger, 1994). All children in the pilot study and the main study liked the idea of their responses being tape recorded and part of the contract with the children was that they would often ask to hear themselves on the tape at the end of the session. In order for their voices to be heard clearly the children had to speak one at a time which at times they found difficult to adhere to but they did quickly engage with the process and start screening their peers if more than one was talking at a time. As Mauthner (1997) suggests this is a way of trying to understand the children's experiences of the research process and that the children may see it all as an adventure.

When using a tape recorder in public areas such as school halls and libraries raises the problem of background noise and the clarity of being able to hear what the children were saying. The very limited space in primary schools meant that we were working in public thoroughfares such as corridors, library and hall areas which are usually partitioned but not separated off and generally have very poor acoustics. Also because the tape recorder had to be positioned fairly centrally it did at times (until the children got used to it) distract the children's attention. The boys much more so than the girls wanted to hold it, switch it on and off or generally just see how it worked which was another issue that needed to be managed within the sessions. Having gathered my data from the children it was time to move the focus of the research on to the parental role within the consumption cycle and it is to the parent's contributions to which I now turn.

Parental Interviews

Nineteen parents (fourteen mothers and five fathers) aged between twenty-eight and forty-seven were individually interviewed in their homes (although two fathers were interviewed in their workplace) with the use of a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix F). This method was chosen because it contains enough structure to make comparisons between groups, but is flexible enough to cater for individual histories (May 1993). Parents were recruited via the consent form they had completed for their child, on that form they were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed and to be part of the study (Appendix E). From this just under half the parents (42%) to the number of children that participated volunteered to be part in the study.

In line with other studies (Hood *et al.* 1996) access to fathers was very difficult. Of those who were interviewed two were lone fathers. One was working part-time as was his partner so that between them they could care for their children and one father was semi-working from home and his partner was working full-time. In two of the families I ended up interviewing the child, the mother and the father who all gave very different perspectives to the issues being discussed. It was also a very rich illustration of how family roles were being played out in relation to the various aspects of consumption with the ensuing dynamics that this brought about.

The two lone fathers that were interviewed brought up issues in terms of household gender roles, which will be discussed more fully in Chapter 6. In the case of one of the fathers who gave a very powerful interview relating to the social, personal and economic struggles he faced in bringing up his children alone I seemed unprepared for the depth of the difficulties this lone father was experiencing. Reflecting back on it I can see that I had, albeit sub-consciously, been operating from a position of seeing primarily women struggling to cope on their own with young children as a by-product of the hegemonic masculinity perpetrated in many parts of our society. I was, it seems, more than willing to blame both society's often male privileged view of the world and men's own lack of individual responsibility for the many struggles that women and children face on a daily basis. In this example however was a very clear example where issues were presented to me in a way that was difficult to comprehend. What I was faced with was a father struggling as much as a mother in the same position and it could be argued that the oppressor in this example, if there was one, was class rather than gender. The gender issue for me, was that I as a woman researcher and my own biography had not allowed me to anticipate what I was faced with in this interview.

The depth of the social, personal and economic disadvantage that this interviewee was dealing with had, for a while, left my ontological position in a state of flux and most definitely challenged.

The main aim of interviewing the parents was to try and assess parents' motivations and aspirations for buying the items that they buy for their children whilst also contextualising children's agency in this process. Parents were interviewed after my work in the school had finished so I had built up a clear picture of the children's thoughts on the subject. I could then temporarily bracket off those issues whilst I concentrated on an adult's perspective on the matters at hand. The overwhelming majority of the parents held strong opinions on the subject and, as I will discuss in Chapter 7, many were actively engaging with but equally struggling to deal with the many challenges that they faced within the terrain of children's material culture.

Many of the parents were quite anxious that their stories were corroborated by their children and they would often comment "oh they'll probably make me out to be telling lies here" or they would ask me what their child had said. I had contracted with the children that whatever they told me would be confidential and therefore I was not in a position to respond to the parents if they did ask me direct questions about what their child had said as some did. It was important to some of the parents that they were all telling the same story. Mauthner (1997) found in her work with families in the home environment that "mothers do want to exert control over children's responses, particularly when trying to uphold a certain public image of family life or the family front" (p.19). It seemed rather strange but there was definitely this theme of parents

wanting to get it 'right' thus to confirm what it is they thought their children would have said.

In some of the interviews the children were actually at home at the time of the interview either because it was after school time or, in one case, because the child concerned was unwell. Although I was not a stranger to the children I was certainly a stranger to their parents. Having the children at home seemed to change the dynamic of the interview even though in some cases the children were not in the room where the interview with the parent was taking place. However, in some of the interviews the children were in the room when the interview was occurring and again there was evidence of the parent looking to the child to reinforce what they were saying. As Mayall (2000) suggests collecting data from people's homes presents other challenges and the researcher's role has to be negotiated. Many of my parental respondents were obviously unsure as to what would take place, although the children clearly had been talking with their parents about what they had been doing with me at the school. I had also thinly sketched out what would happen when I had made the initial interview time over the telephone so they did have some knowledge as to what to expect.

In these circumstances the researcher may be seen as a guest rather than a researcher (Finch, 1984; Mayall, 2000) it is also possible to see that the interviewee is positioning the researcher in some way. There was a very clear example of this when I went to interview a parent that was living in an area of high deprivation. Ms. Lawley welcomed me in to her home early in the morning and I was rather taken aback when I saw that she had laid out a tray of tea and biscuits in anticipation of my arrival. On reflection, I could see that this parent was probably used to having professionals

entering her home and no doubt had to offer up areas of her life for inspection and surveillance and had wanted to make the right impression. As Finch (1984) suggests women, more so than men, are used to having intrusions into their lives through questioning particularly the private aspects of their lives. It was clear as the interview started out that this parent was emphasising things that she thought I would want to hear such as highlighting the importance of learning through play and the educational dimension of toys and games. However, as the interview progressed the nature of the responses changed.

Equally though in the more affluent areas parents were still feeling the need to justify why they did what they did. Parents' decisions and actions were often intertwined with definitions or expressions to the outsider (i.e. the researcher) of their parenting skills. This parent had suggested that the Pokemon craze that was raging at the time of the interview could be directly linked to the National Curriculum as a means of legitimising why he had allowed Zak to have the Pokemon cards,

“Pokemon actually has got quite a few good points about it in terms of even with my youngest who's 7. You know his reading comes on because he wants to read what's on the cards. His maths you know they're doing the maths where they are calculating hit points and whatever you know. So we can see it as partially educational.”

So whatever socio-economic position individuals may be operating from as researchers when we enter parents' worlds, albeit for a short amount of time, our position is professionally loaded. No matter how neutral researchers try to be when eliciting information from adults at the start of the interview process it is likely they will have been positioned by their interviewees into a particular role. The interviewees will arguably, then, talk to the interviewer in a manner that speaks to that role. As

researchers there is a need in light of that positioning to be able to reflexively monitor not just how the researcher sees their role but to be attuned to the role that the interviewees think the researchers are in.

Parents were asked to comment on the same sorts of issues as the children. The following questions were typical and provided a useful starting point: what influenced their child to want certain things? What were the main influences that affected their decision making about what they were going to buy? Who does what in terms of mother and father roles? In terms of their overall household budget how easy or how difficult did they find it to give their children the things that they wanted? Did parents consider there were any differences for boys and girls? I had a semi-structured interview schedule with topics that I wanted to explore but in many cases the interviewees led the agenda and often talked about issues that clearly were important to them and answered many of the areas that I wanted to cover anyway. I did have some ideas about what might be important to the parents on this topic from the themes that were explored in the pilot study. I tried not to be directive but if I wanted to pick up on a specific point or I felt that the interviewee had drifted too far from the subject I was able to focus the respondent back on to a particular area or question. Using qualitative methods of data collection clearly gives the interviewer the flexibility to do so.

A strong theme that emerged from the pilot study interviews with parents was how much they reflected back to their own childhood for their rationale on what they did and didn't do for their children. This intra-generational 'flipping' resulted in some very rich narratives as to how much parents earlier experiences were shaping their

adult lives and the lives of their children. As Giddens (1991) suggests “the self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future” in which the reworking of childhood holds a central place (p.72). Cuthbert (1997) adds that people do often take comfort in ensuring ‘continuity from the past’. People often locate parents or family tradition when recounting the plot when telling a story. Parents were very receptive to the negotiation process and it appeared that decisions were not simply given because they were the parent or the adult. In amongst all of the negotiations between adults and children parents were using their own experience of the concept of childhood to parent their own children. Childhoods of the past are active in the present and the childhood values of adults are made available to young people through their own parenting practice and this process is clearly negotiated (Thomson *et al.* 2000).

The majority of the parents talked very easily about this aspect of their children’s lives as well as their own roles in the process. Parents were very much engaged with the topic and in the main saw the issues surrounding children’s consumption practices as being much more complex and pressurised than they had experienced it in their own childhoods. This last point has been verified in other studies by authors such as Jackson *et al.* (2000) and Thomson *et al.* (2000). Whilst there is a danger of lapsing in to nostalgia in looking back in time there was enough evidence to indicate that as far as parents were concerned there had been a significant shift in children’s consumption experiences over the last two to three decades. There is a need to exercise caution however and to question, as Hall (1997) does, whether personal narratives can be regarded not as a reflection of life but rather as a way of constructing it.

Concluding comments

This chapter has outlined the methodological standpoint that I adopted and the issues that arose from occupying that position whilst carrying out this research. Doing research with children may be seen, in some senses, as a risky enterprise (Hood *et al* 1996) but the return that it yields when carried out systematically, rigorously and sensitively is worth all the planning, rejection and resistance that may be experienced in the research journey. To be able to give children the chance to have a voice and express their thoughts and feelings on their lives can be both empowering for the children and the researcher alike. As Prout concludes “only through different participative mechanisms at all levels of society can different children’s interests and experiences have a chance of being heard” (2000a:10).

Children, it seems, have much to tell us as adults if only we would take the time to listen. Children do not merely internalize adult culture, they become part of it and arguably contribute to cultural reproduction and change through their negotiations with each other and their production of a series of peer cultures with other children (Eder and Corsaro, 1999). It may be seen to be methodologically more problematic to work with young children. I would argue, however, that this is not necessarily more so than with any other group. I would concur with Jenks (2000) who suggests:

“it is not necessary to like children, love children or live with children or to see them as more or any less important than any other group in society to do interesting research into the state of childhood...I do not have to be Caesar in order to understand Caesar”

(p.69/71).

This researcher, at least, firmly believes that children are quite capable of telling us about their lives and their experiences in the world, if only adults would just stop

trying to guess what they feel and listen closely to what it is they have to say
(McCrum 1993).

Chapter 6

Children: Data and Discussion

In Chapter 4 I pointed out that the literature to date has largely neglected children as consumers. All too often the emphasis and focus has been primarily on youth and adolescent lifestyles. One of my concerns when I undertook this research was that because of the age of the children, they are to a degree an integral part of their parents tastes and lifestyles all the data would reflect was parents preferences and choices of consumer goods. However, as will be seen when I delve more deeply into the discussions that took place both with the children and between the children they do seem to exercise a great deal of agency in choosing their material possessions. Children, are by no means the passive recipients of their parents choices and decisions in the purchase of consumer goods. There are many examples of children in all the social groups exerting pressure over their parents to buy particular products. Children from middle class families whose parents arguably are able to resist the pressure to buy particular items (Middleton *et al.* 1994) were equally shaping their parent's decisions regarding purchasing and choice of consumer goods. Within this research many children, by both overt and covert methods had managed to get parents to give in to requests for certain types of consumer products that they had initially said they would not allow them to have.

There were several themes that emerged from the data elicited during interviews, focus groups, diaries and group work. Even at this young age in the main, children's socio-economic background appears to shape their life experiences. In parts of their

lives there are major differences in the children's day-to-day lives. There is however a surprising number of similarities. As I have already mentioned in Chapter 3 it could be argued that for children themselves they could be seen to be classless, in that there was a point where social class differences collapsed. That point concerned was in what children owned and desired in terms of material possessions. I will return to this argument in Chapter 8 but for now I want to outline the main themes that emerged out of the data from the children's interviews and group work.

Consistent with other studies children's favourite material possessions by age and gender were broadly similar (Middleton *et al.* 1994; Kamptner 1991). However in terms of the consumption process per se the children themselves identified areas of their lives that are linked to consumption that are far more complex than much of the media debate has previously given them credit for. In Chapter 4 it can be seen that there has been a huge shift in terms of children being directly targeted as a segment of the market (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; McNeal, 1987) and the subsequent positioning of goods to appeal to that market which ultimately will impact on the data generated.

Themes and issues that seem to be particularly relevant to the children when discussing their interactions with the consumer process were peer culture, gender, age, material possessions and parental affection and children's perceptions of their own economic status. Consumer goods also appeared to be ordered in a hierarchical model in the constructs of some of the children. What influenced children to want certain items and how they negotiated with their parents (and other adults) to buy them things was also a strong theme. Whilst the topics have been separated out for

further discussion I want to contrast the two groups and to look how they interact with the world of consumption and how it impacts on them. As I have already discussed in Chapter 5 a range of methods were used to elicit data on the many aspects of children's interactions with both consumer goods and services. The first of these was the completion of a diary detailing how they spent their leisure time between Friday evening and Sunday evening the results of which are described below.

Leisure activities

The range of activities that children experienced at West Street School were incredibly varied and included activities such as family walks, ice-skating, playing musical instruments, shopping (with parents) and playing games both outside and inside the family home. Interestingly, the notion of children's activities and freedoms being more restricted because of the perceived risk in public spaces did not relate to what the children said they actually did in their diaries. Playing in the park with their friends or being outside playing football for the boys, for example, were activities that featured regularly in both sets of diaries. Watching television featured strongly in all of the children's diaries particularly Saturday morning television, which is clearly aimed at children's leisure time. Going to a friend's house or having friends over to their houses also played a prominent part in children's free time. In the East Street area there was also a much narrower range of activities listed but there were less diaries completed in this area, the main theme for the East Street children were for the boys playing football and for both boys and girls watching television and videos. Only 4 children mentioned shopping in their diaries compared to 12 children in the West Street area. However, this needs to be read against the geographical location of the area and access to supermarkets which are primarily situated out of the town centre.

Those that are in the town centre stock a lower range of items and tend to be more expensive. Transport is also limited and for families in the less affluent area to do a one-off weekly shopping trip is less likely than in the West Street area due to limited transport and financial resources. Children at East Street School did not tend to refer specifically to family activities in the same way that West Street children did. One diary from the East Street area mentioned a family trip to the waterfront area of the city where they lived. In the West Street area four children talked of trips to the grounds of their local National Trust property and another four children mentioned either a family walk or bike ride (See Table 3 overleaf).

At the end of the diaries the children were asked to list any activities that they did on a regular basis each week, for example, scouts or swimming. There were significant differences between the two sites. Out of the 19 diaries completed at West Street 24 different activities or membership of particular clubs were listed that children did on a regular basis compared to 2 activities from the 12 diaries returned from the East Street School (see Table 4 overleaf). I had wondered if this difference may have been due to a methodological oversight in the design of the diaries in that, this section was the last page of the diary and perhaps children had missed it. However, when I distributed the diaries I carefully went through the layout of the diary and drew their attention to this section at the back of the diary. As none of the children from West Street had missed this section it seems reasonable to assume that this was a fairly accurate reflection of the differences in membership of and participation in extra curricular clubs and activities. Whilst the actual differences may not be as overwhelming as the diaries

Table 3**Diaries**

Leisure time activities between Friday evening and Sunday evening listed in diaries by area.

	East Street	West Street
Watching Television/Video		
Listening to music	25	28
Playing/watching football	12	15
Playing outside (friends)	6	19
Playing park/garden	2	3
Shopping food/clothes/other	4	13
Computer games/games consoles.	6	8
Family walk	1	10
Riding/swimming/dance ballet/gym clubs	0	8
Beach/sunbathing/ barbecue	5	0
Piano/clarinet practice	0	6
Cinema/play zones/ bowling	2	3
Swimming	4	2
Café/ McDonald's	1	2
Homework	0	2
Helping with housework	3	0
Reading a book/cooking	1	5
Guide trip/School Fayre	1	3
Tennis/ Skiing	0	2
Bike riding	0	3
Sunday School	2	0
After school club	0	2
Playing games/toys	3	1
Trip to garden centre	0	1
Looking after animals	1	0
Sleepover/having friend over	9	1
Fun run	1	0
Going to a birthday party	0	6
Rock climbing/building a tree house	2	0

Table 4

After school activities

Number of children in each area listing membership of clubs or participation in regular after school activities

Clubs and extra-curricular activities	East Street	West Street
Guides/Cubs/Scouts Brownies		11
Swimming or swimming lessons		6
Football training		4
Gym class		3
Learning to play musical instrument		3
Orchestra/Choir		2
Dance class		2
After school club		2
Badminton		1
Ball boy (Football)	1	
Youth Club	1	
Skiing club		1
Tennis		1
Underwater hockey		1
Ballet		1
Tag rugby		1
Netball		1
Snooker		1

indicate it seems reasonable to conclude that children in the West Street area enjoyed a much wider choice of activities and interests than the children in the less affluent area. The activities listed at West Street School ranged from the more general cubs and scouts to underwater hockey. An extensive range of sporting activities were being undertaken as were lessons to enable a wide range of musical instruments to be played.

Social class and its relevance from a child's perspective

The inequalities that emerged in children's use of leisure time were very class specific. The range of activities undertaken and the affiliation to clubs and pursuits that would enhance the educational curriculum was extremely high at West Street School. Children in this area appeared to be developing forms of cultural capital that are likely to be of relevance to their future social and educational careers. Within Bourdieu's (1984) framework music lessons and sporting activities are forms of capital that are also power relational. For example, individuals and groups employ strategies for investing, accumulating and ultimately converting to various forms of capital to either maintain or enhance their position in the social order. In this example parents are investing in extra curricular activities in order for children to be able to keep up within the formal education system, which may also enhance their future educational and occupational plans. Forms of cultural capital, it could be argued are becoming more and more the new basis of social stratification (Lane 2000). This was evident in this study with less well off parents commenting that providing children with technological resources such as personal computers was essential in the current educational climate (Buckingham, 2000). It could be suggested in the long term that these educational forms of cultural capital will also be converted to forms of

economic capital. The children at West Street were also aware of indirect forms of wealth. For example if we focus on Bourdieu's (1984) work there were some clear examples of children acknowledging both forms of social and cultural capital, Tia gives a really good example of this,

Tia: Winning races could give you a good bit of money maybe not in cash and that but be like quite rich with like loads of gold medals and things like that.

J: Right so you could be rich with other things apart from money.

Tia: Yes.

[The other children in the group agreed with Tia when she said this]

Most of the children at West Street had also learnt that 'having a good job' at some level equates to being rich or being able to have certain things again when asked what makes someone rich Tia says:

Tia: A good job.

J: What would be a good job?

Tia: Teacher.

David aged 10 is even more explicit and directly relates what you earn as a means to giving you more purchasing power:

David: Sometimes it can be down to the job that your parents have.

J: Right tell me about that.

David: Because sometimes, sometimes if you've got a good job you may get paid more money and that may be why some people get more things than others.

Lila follows this up by pointing out what she sees as the negative aspects of what can happen if your parents don't work:

Lila: My friends...I went into their room and they've got hardly any like things in their room it's just empty because like their parents don't work or anything. When they come in our room they're like absolutely gobsmacked and they just play with all our stuff for hours.

What possessions are important to children?

During group discussions children identified what possessions were important to them and as such they were asked to list the three favourite things that they owned. Considering the number of children interviewed there were very few differences in the range of items that the children mentioned. compact disc players, computers, dolls, teddies, jewellery, football, pets, snooker table, K'nex, Pokemon cards and musical instruments all emerged as children's favourite possessions. The range of favourite possessions did not vary hugely either, which is probably not too big a surprise given the market position as well as the marketing of certain products. Eventually the six most favourite items listed were game consoles, pets, personal computers, compact disc players, Pokemon cards and accessories, television and video recorders.

Ownership of home entertainment items such as televisions, compact disc players and video recorders were mentioned amongst all groups. However, the more affluent area showed higher ownership of Year 6 children having access to their own television set than for the children in the less affluent area. The trend was reversed for Year 4 children where the highest rates of ownership for televisions was in the less affluent area. These figures were interesting because parents in the West Street area were more vocal in wanting to resist children having these items at a young age. Parents generally saw them having a negative effect on how children would spend their time. For Year 6 children in this area however, there were very high levels of ownership

amongst this group. With the older children a higher number of children in the more affluent area also had access to a PC at home. The less affluent area had higher rates of ownership for 'personal' videos, compact disc players and Playstations. There were not the negative connotations attached to children owning these items in East Street compared to West Street. In fact it was often seen to be a good thing by the parents for children to own these items. Spatially creating a place for children to amuse themselves particularly in children's bedrooms where they could engage with their own interests seemed to be of significance in the organisation of the family home. It would be tempting to suggest that the cultural signifiers in children's own spaces are differentiated by socio-economic positioning however, in this study this was not necessarily as clear cut as might have been first envisaged.

Material possessions and peer culture

Although I had anticipated that friendship groups would be important to the children and that for some children material possessions would act as signifiers in including them within certain groups I think I was totally unprepared as to how strongly this would become a theme throughout the focus group discussions. It was at times also very subtle. It was not always what children said but the context in which they said things, which gave an insight in to how they were constructing their relationships in terms of the consumer goods they had or aspired to. Equally the majority of children were aware that not having these signifiers would result in derision and ridicule. Teasing about certain items of clothing was much more ingrained in East Street School. This may have been because the uniform policy seemed to be looser at this School. Therefore, it was easier to differentiate those who looked different to their peers on the basis of what they were wearing. However, not having certain toys or

clothes brought comment and awareness from children in both Schools. For instance, this group of children talked about why some children get teased and Hedgehog aged 8 (West Street School) illustrates how he was teased because he was the last boy in his class to have Pokemon cards:

Britney: Because if you've had some toys and they've only about 3 or so they could be the sort of kids that get teased at school because they haven't got very much toys.

J: Does that happen here do you get teased if you don't have things?

Puppy: Some boys are teasing other people just because they haven't got the right sort of Pokemon cards.

[The others interject with "yeah"].

J: And what sort of things would they say?

Britney: They would say...

Hedgehog: Ha, ha you've got 'grubs park'.

[singing the chant that other children use at them].

J: What does that feel like when that happens?

Britney: Sometimes it makes you feel all funny inside.

Hedgehog: I got teased first when the Pokemon cards came out um and everyone else had them and I was the only boy (laughs nervously) who didn't have any Pokemon cards.

Within this family there were some very interesting dynamics being played out in terms of the child and each of the two parents around this one item. All three family members clearly had very different views on the subject and all of them were dealing with this matter in different ways. For example the mother felt that Pokemon was an absolute waste of money and said she had resisted buying the cards.

When asked why his mother did not like Pokemon cards Harry replied with:

“...because she thinks it’s stealing children’s money”

The father ultimately went and purchased the cards but then Harry was given one card at a time which was usually linked to a positive result at school. This pressure that directly (in the child’s case) or indirectly (in the parents case) was being viewed in different ways within the familial home and with all the family members taking a particular stance on the subject. This was impacting on all of them albeit in different ways and needs to be thought about in terms of children’s consumer goods and the pressures on parents to ensure their child’s inclusion into wider social networks.

At East Street School however the teasing was much more prevalent and children seemed to be targeted for all sorts of reasons. Teasing was also a very real fear for most of the children and for the Year 6 children this was also the basis of many of their fears in moving to their secondary school. Their fears were based on the premise that they looked right by wearing the ‘right clothes and footwear’ which would hopefully mean they would fit in.

J: Why did you want Adidas trainers?

India: Because everyone takes the mick out of my ‘Hi-Tec’ ones.

J: Why what’s the matter with them?

India: Nothing it’s just the make of them everyone says they’re horrible and that, that they’re cheap.

One group of boys took a harder line in their attitude to this teasing. Gilbert tried to be strong and appear unphased about it all to make it look like they were not bothered

about what their peers thought. Skunge and Kane illustrate the belief that if you have got all the up to date items the perception is you won't get targeted:

J: OK, what about children that have got lots more things...

Skunge: Don't get taken the mick out of 'cos they're in the fashion and people see they dress smartly.

Kane: Yeah they do.

Gilbert: Yeah 'cos people take the mick out of um trainers and I just says they're trainers their meant to keep your feet warm, they do the job properly don't they it's not like they need to be a fashionable make?

J: Has that happened here has that happened to you?

Gilbert: Yeah I've had trainers, which had no make and got taken the mick out of.

Frederick took a more aggressive stance to the problem and interestingly he was a child who probably had the least amount of material possessions (from the discussions that took place with him and his father) so arguably he probably had to defend his corner more than most.

J: What would you do Frederick?

Frederick: I would hit 'em I would.

J: Would you?

Gilbert: I wouldn't.

J: Why would you do that Frederick?

Frederick: So they wouldn't do it again I'd smack 'em.

Peer culture seems to be a very strong influence for these children, parents and teachers in this study also see it as the absolute in terms of influencing children's choice of material goods. Perhaps children look to other mediums for influence and

direction in their lives and they look to their peers whom they are likely to have more in common with than their parents. This in turn may be difficult for parents to rationalise. If parents see this transition as an inevitable stage in children developing their identities and their progression towards adulthood as a challenge to their authority and control, it could be construed by parents as a gradual erosion of their persuasion and influence over their children.

The children themselves are much harder to pin down on the issue of peer pressure and peer conformity. In fact if questioned directly about wanting what their friends have they will often say they want to be different to their friends but, in a much more subtle way, when discussing generally what influences them, they often cite wanting to be like their friends. For example, Ruth aged 9:

J: Can anyone remember a time when they really wanted something for their birthday or for Christmas?

Ruth: I can remember once I wanted to get these new platform boots people call them space boots but my mum said I'd be able to get 'em next time it was my birthday.

J: Why did you really want those?

Ruth: Because my friends and all have got 'em.

J: And why is it important for you to have them?

Ruth: Just so I can be like part of my friends.

J: Part of your friends...

Ruth: ...look like 'em.

J: Do you like being, looking like your friends?

Ruth: Yeah 'cos they dress up posh.

Britney aged 8 comments:

J: What about when you go to School discos or something do you like to have clothes that are different to your friends or similar?

Britney: Similar.

J: Why similar?

Britney: Because if it's similar, if it's similar then like, like me and Kerrie keeps on saying we look like we're twins and we find that quite good.

Tia and Lila 11 said:

Tia: Well me and Leanne always go out with jeans and a denim jacket 'cos I just think it looks I dunno I just like wearing them 'cos it's comfy.

J: So you would wear similar things probably?

Tia: Yes 'cos Leanne and me have got like the same clothes sense.

Lila: I don't really copy people's things um that they wear I try and get like the same type of style but it won't be exactly the same.

It transpired as the interviews developed that some of the children were reluctant to admit that they wanted to have things that were similar to their friends as this was seen by some of the children to be a negative thing. This was particularly the case in East Street School where it was often taken as being seen to be copying for example

Kane aged 10:

J: Why do you like different things?

Kane: Because also you're just copying people and they calls you a copycat and that.

Equally Tracy aged 10 comments:

Tracy: I don't like it either. Everyone picks on ya if you're dressed the same as other people.

Some children acknowledged the fact that friends were an influence in what they decided to buy there was always the caveat of stressing that they were not copying others.

J: Um how do you decide what things you want do you decide by what your brothers and sisters have or your friends?

Tamara: My friends!

Tracy: Yeah what I like it's not really my friends it's just what I decide to have it's not no one else 'cos sometimes people copy me and sometimes I copy them.

Certainly whilst working with the children over a period of time and listening to the many conversations that took place, although not often explicitly stated, there was this strong theme of children wanting to belong and to fit in. It seemed to be part of a particular childhood culture. For adults it could be argued that we too want all of those things and as adults age, society and personal choice offers us the autonomy to choose where we would like to fit in. For children however they are not afforded such agency. Children often lack the maturity that for many, age brings and younger children are not always able to make many decisions without adult supervision. However, for the time that they are children and that they are financially dependent on adults, children have to work within the familial guidelines that are on offer to them. To a large extent children cannot choose where and how their families live their lives and when they are exposed to difference in terms of who has what it is hard to see how they can make sense of it all.

For children living in families where there is a very low income they are disadvantaged in many more ways than their better-off peers (Middleton *et al.* 1994).

In this study there were some very strong examples of this disadvantage. Several of the children in East Street School were living in foster families and had been in families where they had suffered both emotional and physical disruption. Additionally for some, school appeared to be a site of conflict with teachers, exclusions and difficulties with the school culture. Money was also very short and they were unable to buy the things that many of their friends have. It could be argued if children are experiencing unstable or unhappy situations going on in their lives the additional pressure of being targeted by their peers because they have not got the right label on their trainers could be an issue they could well do without. Some parents do not agree with buying particular items for social or political reasons. This is a difficult course for some children to steer. If children are unable to have items because parents do not think they are a particularly good idea is not the same issue as for children who live in families where parents do not have the means to buy the item or send them on the school trip in the first place.

For some of the children that took part in this research it could be seen that they were being wounded by some of the harsh remarks, criticisms and judgements being placed on them if their parents were unable to buy them certain consumer goods. As Tamara and Daniella indicate below in the East Street area they are having to juggle many complex social problems. For example, familial or community problems seemed to be a concern and these issues may be hard for adults to fully comprehend yet, for some of these children they are having to manage these situations on a regular basis. The following conversations all took place in East Street School and showed some of the much deeper issues that this group of children are having to manage on a daily basis:

J: So this kind of teasing and things that happens to children that haven't got very many things as well does it?

Tamara: It happens to people who like have got foster parent as well they go ha ha I least I live with my mum or at least I live with my dad.'

India: Don't matter who you've got for your parents as long as they look after you.

For this group of girls they had become aware that there were other stresses and strains impacting on other people's quality of life. In this example Daniella and Tracey are discussing why it would be beneficial for their friend to have a holiday away from the area where she lived. It could even be seen that their comments suggest these children felt entitled to particular consumer goods:

Daniella: Yeah they're being really selfish. 'Cos I know we get it everybody gets like something but Josie the one that lives up above her and she haven't got no holidays and I feel like so sorry for her because one day if I was like if I played with her I feel like sorry for her really she needs a holiday from all the gossip around the street and all that.

J: Why would you want to get away from all the gossip then?

Daniella: Because say someone's chinning you because they don't like you and sometimes you like probably stick up for yourself when they're nasty haven't you got that 'cos you know they can't afford it.

Tracy: There's this one girl over from you and she said that she's never ever had a holiday or she gets things but she's never had a holiday her mum and dad's always falling out 'int they?

Daniella: She lives in our block we can't get to sleep 'cos her mum's rowing and stuff.

Material possessions and gender

Children's preferred choices of material possessions were gendered and girls and boys had in the main very stereotypical views on what girls and boys liked. In some cases

children did tend to say some of the things that their friends had said so that needs to be taken into account when considering the choices they made. For example in one group of children at West Street School 3 out of 4 of the children in the group chose their flute as one of their favourite items. This was the first group to do the exercise and was the only group where this item was mentioned. It does, therefore, seem fair to assume that in this particular example there was an interview effect which resulted in children feeling safer saying something that somebody had already said until they got used to the dynamics of the research process.

For the boys time and again it came down to technological toys and games machines such as Playstations. Audio equipment was a favourite for many of the children and there was quite a significant difference between the 8-9 year-olds in both areas. For example in West Street (the more affluent area) the children tended to list a most favourite item as a cuddly toy or their Pokemon cards whereas in East Street School the vast majority in this age group cited a compact disc player or a Playstation as their most favourite item. Based on what the children said they had, there appeared to be key differences between the two sites in terms of ownership of home entertainment goods such as televisions, videos, Playstations and compact disc players. In the 8-9 year-old age group in the East Street area there were a greater number of children claiming ownership of these goods in their bedrooms. The children at West Street School also talked of things where they had some kind of emotional attachment such as pets, or symbolic items such as jewellery, which was linked to an attachment to a family member. They also listed a wider range of items compared to East Street where there appeared to be a much smaller range of items discussed.

The correct symbols for inclusion amongst children's peer groups in the form of material goods is undoubtedly a big piece in assembling the jigsaw of the world of children's consumer culture. Often not articulated in any rational or coherent framework the most popular signifiers that the majority of children owned or aspired to own were the things that seemed to bind children together in terms of a 'shared' culture. These items were predominately for the boys games consoles and computer games. There was also a very large gender divide in terms of technological games; not just in the ownership of such items but also in the perception of the children of what boys might own and what girls might own. The boys were focused on Playstations and football (particularly noticeable because the interviews were taking place at the time of the Euro 2000 competition so this theme emerged time and time again). The girls generally talked in terms of fashion, clothes and cuddly toys. A point that also was of interest was that most of the girls talked of their disinterest for Playstation games because there 'were not very many for girls' the games themselves it appeared to the children were gendered and therefore were seen to be a boys game rather than a girls game:

Rachel: My brother likes computer games and I like playing out with my friends.

J: Do you think that's general, do boys like computer games more?

[There is a unanimous yes].

J: Why do you think that is?

Lila: Things like football games, racing games...

Rachel: ...wrestling, fighting games.

Annie: Things for the Playstation there's not much girl games.

Lila: No...probably because there's more like boy things on the computer than there is girl things...they're all like car games and things.

Rachel: My brother's always playing football games and car games.

J: So if you had 'girl' games would you play with them more do you think?

Lila: Yeah probably.

Rachel: I hardly ever have a go on the Playstation because my Brother's always on his games and like I've only got about one game and it's Rugrats.

The gender split between children and technological toys was also a theme when talking to the parents and this aspect will be discussed in more detail when I consider the parental issues in Chapter 7. The children themselves often talked of 'Dad' or 'Brother' playing with the Playstation. Both girls and boys seemed to believe that the toys themselves were gender specific and this was particularly the case for the girls lack of interest with technological toys. These results are in line with other studies in the field. Littleton et al (1998) found that girls had problems engaging with computer games because of the type and content of the games. Girls' lack of engagement with technological toys it seems reflects the design of the software and the composition of the games themselves. The majority of the games are seen to be boy orientated they are according to the girls about fighting, football and motor racing. The available computer games appear to be very clearly age graded. Games that girls had liked when they were younger were now seen to be too 'babyish'. It appears from these girls that as they aged the games did not age with them but deviated off into a boy's world. Boys' engagement with games consoles and computer games would be, for many it seems, a long-term hobby as many children talked of their older brothers and their

fathers being keen consumers of this type of entertainment. Further research is needed to identify whether engaging girls at a younger age with these fun types of technologies may improve girls' engagement with technology in later life.

Many of the children had clear demarcation lines about what was a girl's toy and what was a boy's toy. In line with Messner's (2000) work on 'children constructing gender through play' to transgress those norms was often ridiculed or provided a great source of amusement to other children within the group.

Katy: Girls like Barbie stuff and dolls...some girls like boy's stuff and some weird boys like girls stuff.

Tracy: They're the same 'cos when I was about 8 or 9 you know Ian [a boy in their class] he just came out he used to play (whispers and then giggles) with Barbies. When I was little and I had "Barbies he used to come up and say (giggles) can we play Barbies?"

The essentialist stance whereby toys and games are separated off on the basis of gender as being appropriate for a particular sex gives out the message that boys and girls are fundamentally different. As such as children progress through their early years, particularly within the school framework, one group cannot transgress the boundaries of another group without difficulty or risk of ridicule. For boys it seems they have to get it right in terms of activities and material possessions, crossing the divide for boys can be seen to be doubly deviant because they are deemed to be behaving inappropriately around their sexuality. Juxtaposed to this is the notion of adopting roles that are seen to be of a lower status than traditional stereotypical masculine behaviour (Unger 1992). Even in an arguably post-feminist era alternative discourses are still not being offered to children to step beyond the roles that they themselves have been socialised into and which inevitably have a sense of familiarity

and comfort attached to them. Davies and Banks (1995) appear to be correct in suggesting that children need to be given wider discourses to draw from if they are to be freed from the gender order in which they are embedded.

Fashion, clothes and gender

Clothes, fashion and make-up were dominant themes in the girls discussion groups about their own lives but also when discussing their favourite stars such as Britney Spears and S Club 7. As discussed in Chapter 4 the notion of the tweenies was central to the discourses that the girls were drawing upon through media sources and the types of shops from which they liked to buy their clothes from. In order to 'do' consumption meant that for the girls they were also 'doing' gender and this was a particular form of gender as portrayed in the wider discourses of the media. These findings were running parallel to Russell and Tyler's (2001) study of 8-11 year old girls interacting with a retail chain called 'Girl Heaven' and is probably the first published academic piece of work on the subject of tweenies. The media, however, where the term tweenies was arguably invented have been debating the concept since the latter part of the year 2000 (Smith 2000; Rice 2000). For the tweenie boys who are under represented in the media literature, technological games and football were the most popular items and certainly the focus of boys' leisure time.

In terms of clothes and fashion for all ages and both groups of children the notion of fashion and clothes had been cast as a girl's set of interests. There were however discussions with the older boys (in both areas) where they were aware that what you wore would get you noticed by other boys but more importantly got you noticed by girls, for example the following discussion with Skunge and Kane aged 11:

Skunge: 'Cos like you can not like 'show off' you can like show 'em what you've got.... [the boys]

Kane: Yeah 'cos then girls like you 'cos you get different things.

Skunge: I likes to have different things because you can show 'em the way they dress and then they'll want to get it and it'll go round the school.

Kyle: If you're looking good you're popular, people think they're snazzy.

David: Other people do notice what you are wearing.

These boys then went one step further and said:

Kyle: Clothes are important if you are going to get girlfriends.

This second group of boys pursued this theme and discussed at great length about clothes and fashion and their interaction with girls. There was a definite awareness of having to present their bodies in a certain way to be seen as a suitable dating candidate for the girls.

Tia aged 11 also comments on fashion in terms of difference to boys:

J: Um generally speaking do you think there are differences for boys and girls in what they want and what they have.

Tia: Probably because boys are more into sports but I do do sports but they have things like footballs and football shirts.

Lila: Yeah.

Tia: Not like us we'd probably have like really thin strapped tops and...

Lila:...clothes and make-up.

Tia: Yeah. Imagine Jacob with eyeshadow and lipstick on that'd be a laugh.

J: Right why do you think that is then at this age?

Tia: I don't know you just get into it.

J: You get into it from other people at school or...?

Tia: ...just like other people going around and you see older girls going around with loads of lipstick on and things like that it makes you into it.

Lila: When you go into like shops and things you see all these nice things and you end up buying them all.

Tia: And your mum says what about this little cardigan with huge flowers over it? And your like aaaa "no thank you mum" (laughs). Yeah. So you like go out and you find something older and mum goes "oh you don't need that yet do you?"

In terms of fashion and clothes the children had been clearly socialised into their gender roles which appeared to be enveloped within heterosexuality, for example, what you wore would get you noticed by the opposite sex. In terms of icons all the children talked of Britney Spears, S Club 7, the Spice Girls and less often people like the pop star Peter Andre and 'Jamie,' a character from the television soap opera Eastenders. All of these people were talked about in terms of what they looked like and in particular what kind of clothes they wore. The girls in both areas often talked about clothes that would emulate their idols for example hanky tops, halter neck tops or 'belly' tops all of which are available for girls of this age.

Sarah: All the women wear 'crop-tops'.

J: Do you look at what they wear or are you just interested in the music?

Rachel: Sometimes I look at the clothes to get an idea what to wear if you are going to a disco or something.

Lila: You sort of wear like hanky tops.

Rachel: Yeah probably. Some of the popstars are small and they wear children's clothes.

J: Do they?

[They all say Yeah]

J: Who would that be?

Lila: ...Well Britney Spears, S Club 7.

Rachel: Yeah S Club 7 wears children's clothes.

Lila: Hannah she's tiny.

Arguably this results in girls buying in to a particular body image and with the advent of the Spice Girls a few years ago we now have these very sexualised images of younger girls in terms of fashion and clothing. It seems that children are learning the message at a much earlier stage than adolescence that they live in a culture where women's bodies are placed at the centre of consumer culture as objects to be consumed by men (Turner 1984). The market place is now offering young girls the training ground to experiment with fashion and make-up as they are socialised for their future roles of adult women consumers.

Staying with the fashion focus a surprising theme that emerged frequently at East Street School (and interestingly not at West Street School) was the notion of ridicule and stigma attached to people who were alleged to buy their clothes from charity shops. This emerged from discussions about clothes and having to buy clothes from charity shops. This was seen to be a huge source of embarrassment and children were well aware of the stigmas attached to it. The subject of shopping in charity shops never emerged from discussions within West Street School. Children use clothes as a means of making judgements about other children and these are usually enveloped within the wider discourses of poverty and stigma, which result in children having to

endure verbal abuse (Middleton et al 1994). Another harsh reality in the less affluent area and another facet of their lives that has to be managed and there were some very clear examples of the taunting and verbal abuse that children had to endure at School for not having the right clothing or the right label. As we saw in Frederick's comments previously he had already had to position himself within a very strong framework of defending his corner by stating that he "would smack 'em" so as they wouldn't do it again. Clearly a sign that this ridicule is having an effect and in Frederick's case is evoking strong feelings of both anger and emotional pain that he intends to guard against in the future.

S: 'cos like you'd get stuff from Oxfam or something they'd take the mick.

Kane: People laugh, Oxfam it's not laughing, all you do is helping other people.

Charizard: Yeah, people like, laugh.

J: How would they know if it came from Oxfam?

Skunge: They won't.

Kane: They won't but like they might say where did you get that?

Charizard: Who shops at Oxfam here though?

Kane: Me, honest...no I don't.

Skunge: No I went in one charity shop just to get a Playstation game.

Charizard: It's only a charity shop it's only the name of a shop anyway.

J: So do you know children or friends...?

Skunge: There's a girl in our class she wears like charity things.

J: Do you think people make a difference because of that.

S: Yeah 'cos they take the mick don't they?

Charizard and Kane: Yeah!!

Kane: I do sometimes.

Tamara: Yeah my mum told everybody that I bought my clothes from Oxfam.

[They're all laughing at this point]

J: What and that's not a very good thing is it?

Tamara: My mum only went in there messing around she goes 'ere I bought you a brand new skirt from Tammy Girl...and I goes oh yeah.

Tracy: She wore it, she wore it outside her door as well.

Tamara: I wore it right and when she told me I went "ugh" and quickly threw it in the bin I went ugh.

J: What even if it was something that you saw in a Tammy Girl shop you wouldn't want from a second hand shop?

Tamara: No!

India: No!

Clothes and fashion seemed to be extremely important to the girls, in particular they were picking up very strong messages from role models in the media. Some of the boys also were engaging with clothes and fashion but this appeared to be very much dependent on age. None of the boys in Year 4 mentioned clothes and fashion (other than football strips) but clothes had started to become a theme for some of the Year 6 boys. This seemed to be linked to boys becoming aware that in order for them to get noticed by the girls they had to dress in a particular way. There was also an awareness by the girls of the importance of body shape and this was expressed when they were discussing and describing the clothes that their favourite popstars wore. This data

concur with Russell and Tyler that ‘In the case of young girls particularly, the capacity to function as effective consumers seems to be honed largely through the pursuit of an ideal femininity’ (2001:5).

Children’s perceptions of their economic position

In Chapter 4 I discussed the widening inequalities that now exist for children growing up in Britain today and, having established what consumer items were important to children, I wanted to explore whether children themselves were aware of their own economic position compared to other groups of children. Did they for example envisage not being able to have certain products or services compared with other 7-11 year-old children because of their family’s household income? Working with such disparate groups of families on the socio-economic scale I wanted to know whether those notions of difference in terms of household income were understood by the children. To ascertain this I asked them whether they thought they had more than or less than or about the same amount of material possessions as other children they knew. There was a broad range of responses to this question and in West Street they generally thought that they had similar amounts to their friends but overall they thought that they had quite a lot of things. In East Street School the responses were more erratic. When asked if they knew children that didn’t have very many things children in both schools gave examples of children living in countries such as Africa. If they used an example of children in this country it would be of children living on the streets and begging.

These girls (aged 8-9) from lower income households immediately latched on to not having as being in another country:

Jasmine: Yeah it'd be like your sorry for 'em 'cos they haven't got like anything and you've got loads of it.

Ruth: Bit like the 'Heferopians' and the people in Africa really.

J: Can you tell me about that then?

Ruth: Well we're sponsoring this girl...

Jasmine: Yeah she's called Affiffi...

Ruth: ...and she comes from 'Heferopia' and they haven't got very much and most of the people there are dying...

Jasmine: Yeah like they've got mud houses and straw and everything.

Ruth: I really wish that they could have like schools and brick walls instead of mud and um 'cos they haven't got much food and they're dying 'cos of some of the diseases going around and all that. And the flies going on the water and the waters like draining out.

Boys' (aged 11) in the same School followed the same theme:

Kane: Yeah I do, like people in different countries are not so fortunate as us.

J: No tell me a bit about that.

Kane: 'Cos they don't have much because their country's just like hot all the time so they can't find any work to get money so everybody's really poor.

In the more affluent area these 10-11 year old girls voluntarily gave this response to the question do you think there are children that don't have as many things as you have?

Geri: Quite a lot. People in different countries like don't have anything.

J: Right tell me a bit about that.

Geri: People in like Africa haven't even got enough money to get clothes like we have let alone toys because like people there they haven't even seen a balloon before.

And when asked about children in this country:

J: Right so those are children in other countries what about in this country do you think all children have the same?

[Unanimous No]

Geri: There's a lot of poor people on the streets.

J: Is there, how do you know about those people?

Geri: 'Cos like when you go in to town there's like loads of 'em sitting there begging for money.

Pikachu: I think they might feel like a bit upset because some people have got everything and if you've like got nothing...except for like a couple of old rags or something they've made.

In East Street School some groups did occasionally mention a child from their class or their school that they knew who did not have very much. Only one or two children in West Street knew anyone personally and they were not in the school but a cousin or someone outside of the school. Poverty and the idea of not having very many material possessions were primarily constructed in terms of extremes such as Africa or in this country "living on the streets and only having rags to wear" as the quotation above demonstrates. From this research even though as adults we would see extreme differences in children's material lives it did not appear to be a concern that the children themselves were able to articulate or were willing to reveal to their peers in the context of the research.

Material possessions as an indicator of parental affection

For some children there were rumblings that what parents gave to them was partly to do with them showing the children that they care for them. Whilst they could see that this might not always be the case for many children they judged parents in terms of what they gave to their children and also commented on what it might feel like if you didn't have very many things given to you. For the children in this study having high levels of material possessions as well as particular brands and labels had strong emotional connotations attached to them. Material possessions and how many things you were given were tied into how much your parents loved you as Mel demonstrates below:

J: Why do some children get more than others?

Mel: 'Cos their parents love 'em better.

This notion that children were seeing parents love being expressed through what they were given or where they bought items from was clearly something that children were expressing (Belk and Coon, 1993). For example, Lila aged 10 is saying that her mother is doing well because she is buying her nice clothes from Next as opposed to second hand clothes as well as having nice parents who will spend lots of money on her,

Lila: Well my mum um buys all of my clothes but they I know people who get just second hand things and that clothes from other people. My mum gets like really nice clothes from like 'Next' and all that...well they say oh you're lucky you've got really nice parents who will spend lots of money on you.

This idea that material possessions are an indicator of parental affection is reminiscent of Seabrook's (1998) argument about the stability of material possession against the fragility of the notion of family. Seabrook argues that in our society consumer goods

even with their evanescent nature come to look more solid and more reliable than human ties and relationships. For some children in this study it did seem that the amount of material possessions that they received were somehow integrally bound up as a means of how parents may express their love for them.

Whereas for these 11 year-olds they began to talk in terms of why some children got more or less they discussed it in the context of parents shortcomings or as an indicator that they did not care. Value statements were also starting to creep in and for some it seems they had picked up certain messages from what they had heard adults saying for example, Jasmine's commented about her mother's friends children:

Jasmine: They've got loads and loads of toys people that I know they've got loads and loads of toys they live up there and their house is a tip and they've got toys scattered everywhere and their miss...and the pieces are missing and everything and they're really really poor.

J: How do you know that then?

Jasmine Well mum's really close friends to 'em and she knows 'em.

Frederick: His mum's kind but...

Gilbert: She spends her money on herself.

Frederick: Yeah. She can't be bothered to do anything for him.

These 11-year-olds from East Street also talked about what seemed to be an injustice between the adults and the children for their friend living in their block:

Tracy: Normally the people in our block and she lives in our block we can't get to sleep 'cos her mum's rowing and stuff.

Daniella: She's never had a holiday she's said she's never had a holiday in her life she says when she gets older she hopes she has one.

J: What do you think about that then if you've never had a holiday?

Daniella: I think it's sly really.

Tracy: The adults would want to go.

Daniella: They probably had a lovely holiday when they were little children.

Tracy: The adults should give the children a time to like go out 'cos the adults go out like clubbing and all that lot.

Daniella: But I think it's out of order, yeah they're being really selfish.

This 10-year-old from West Street offered an example where children were being deprived not necessarily of consumer goods but of their parents' time. When this child was talking the tone of the comment was fairly judgmental:

Pikachu: Well maybe because their mum and dad go to work and say it's upsetting for the child because they hardly ever get to see their mum and dad because they work and they've got child minders so like for their birthday... 'cos I heard of someone who didn't even go to the child's birthday party they just got the child minder to do it.

This group of 8 year-olds talked in terms of how they might feel if they were in the situation where they did not have very many possessions:

Britney: ...and I would feel like I just wanted to run upstairs and bash in to my bedroom wall. Hurt very much but you wouldn't care because no one cared about you anyway you'd feel like that.

Puppy: Yeah.

J: Is that what you....do you think that if you get lots of things that people care about you?

101: Not really.

Puppy: Doesn't really make a difference but some people do think that people don't care about them if they don't give them lots of things.

J: Have you got an example of that?

Puppy: My cousin she keeps telling me that no-one likes her just because she hasn't got very many toys she hasn't got any friends because all the girls in her class has got lots of things and she has hardly anything.

Age and transition from primary to secondary school

Material possessions, it seems from this research are symbols that children use as a means of expressing their likes and dislikes and offering visible signs to their peers of the differing aspects of their identity. Roedder John (1999) would argue that this is evidence of children entering the reflective stage of their consumer socialisation. A heightened awareness of other people's perspectives, along with a need to shape their own identity and conform to group expectations results in more attention to the social aspects of being a consumer, making choices and consuming brands (Roedder John, 1999). For teenagers and adolescents then, the notion of having branded goods and certain fashion items has been tantamount to being a part of popular culture. This idea is also embedded in the minds of younger children who will be progressing to a new environment and will be part of this bigger culture. The movement from primary to secondary school is a key transitional phase for children and a real cause of anxiety and concern (James, 1999). This was one of the areas where a clear difference emerged in the data elicited from the children and seemed to be causing much higher levels of anxieties in East Street School than in West Street. The over-riding concern of the children in the less affluent area was not about academic success or failure but about having the right clothes, in particular the right shoes or trainers to wear to their

new school. The children appeared to be saying that they were happy to wear a lesser brand of footwear at that time provided they were assured of having the correct footwear in time for the new term. For these children they could be seen as a group that are most vulnerable because they are highly conformist and as Warde states “members of these groups would suffer the highest potential personal embarrassment [and did] from contravening the standards of acceptable taste through the making of inappropriate choices.” (1994a:893).

For the children interviewed this stage was about being able to fit in and certainly not to be targeted by the older children in their perspective school because of their clothes or their footwear. For example Tamara relays a conversation she had with her mother on the subject of trainers,

Tamara: I asked my mum can I have a pair of Nike trainers and she goes no love you can wait until you go straight to secondary School or maybe next month because...

By this stage of the analysis I was perplexed about this constant demarcation whereby, secondary schooling was being the point at which children and parents realise that children have to have branded goods. It appeared to be a non-codified uniform or a specific marker towards the destination of adulthood so I explored it further.

J: Why would you want Nike trainers?

Tamara: Because I wants them for secondary school 'cos everybody takes the mick out of people's shoes and my mum goes "no because I've got to pay £65 for your trip to Delaware by next Monday and she goes after that I swear you can definitely have 'em.

J: So when you go to secondary school is it important to have them then?

Tamara: Yeah.

J: Why?

Tamara: Because if you don't have 'em, like you know people bully you...what you haven't got like the older ones.

J: Do you know someone that has happened to?

Tamara: Yeah loads of people.

Whilst any change situation in both adult's and children's social world's is often riven with anxiety and uncertainty the strength of the anxieties in wanting to own particular consumer goods in time to start their new school was surprising. As the researcher, one has to temper some of the remarks that are made because at times it can start to sound like an urban myth. However if you do delve more deeply as can be seen from the comments above these were acute concerns in the minds of these children. What was surprising was that most of the anxiety was being projected onto superficial indicators such as consumer goods. The concerns were not about academic success or failure but about having particular types of clothing. This anxiety surrounding branded goods was also prevalent in the minds of the parents as will be seen in Chapter 7. Even if parents would not buy particular brands or labels now the majority saw it as an inevitability once the children got to secondary school.

Age graded toys, games and clothes

Age was also of particular relevance amongst both groups, in relation to the types of possessions they wanted to own. This is possibly because age attributes children to clearly defined markers on their journey towards adulthood. Various discourses within society measure children's competencies in relation to their chronological age. One or two years in an ageing adult's life do not reflect the diversity that may exist between say 8 year old and 10 year old children. Age became a strong indicator of children's

transitions from one type of consumer good to another (Gunter and Furnham, 1998). So for example many of the children spoke of being 'too old for toys' or in some cases when we were discussing cuddly toys some of the Year 4 children talked of their older siblings being 'too old for cuddly toys' but that it was still acceptable at their age to have them. Tia in Year 6 talked about wanting more grown up possessions like ornaments for her bedroom. She had very much established a hierarchy in terms of the types of possessions she might have at different ages in your life. The transition, in this case from toys to 'electrical stuff' was very much a symbol for Tia of growing-up when she talks about the types of things her 3 year-old cousin has:

Tia: I kind of feel sorry for her...I think she's 3 and she's only got a few cuddly toys and things like that and compared to me and I've got like all this electrical stuff and things like that.

The majority of 10 and 11 year olds commented that they were too old for toys but did sometimes discuss toys in terms of what older or younger siblings had. For the 7-8 year olds they had started to enter a stage where choices were beginning to be changed by age. They were still into toys and games but some of them had started to move on and were looking to distance themselves from toys such as Barbie and Action Man. More sophisticated possessions were being talked about such as televisions and videos. On this topic Tia again from West Street stated:

Tia: It's that...it's...(long pause) I would just like a video in my room because downstairs my dad likes to watch football all the time so we can't watch like any videos or anything. So I would like to have one in my room so um that I can watch whatever I want when I want.

Further on in the group Tia's thought processes around toys and material possessions was highlighted again when she said:

Tia: My cousin's got she's got loads of like these little plastic car things which go round in the car-washes and things like that but I think she could have like a bit more like grown up stuff like a toy pram or something that she can push around so not like a plastic trolley and things like that.

For the majority of Year 6 children that were interviewed they had no hesitation in telling me that they were too old for toys which often stopped the conversation in its tracks.

Frederick: No girls like Barbie things, fashionable things.

Rodney: Not Barbies because they're a bit old for Barbies in our class I think. I haven't got no toys I don't play with 'em.

J: Don't you?

Rodney: They're for babies.

Kane: I haven't played with my Action Man for about 2 years.

Negotiating with parents for consumer goods

Another area of children's relationship with the consumption process that remains unexplored and not very well understood is how children interact with and encourage parents to buy them the items that they want. In my research I used a pictorial vignette (Appendix C) in which the children had to write the end of a story. The children had to express how the two characters in the story could persuade their mother to change her mind and let them have the item they were requesting. This method proved to be very enlightening in terms of what strategies children actually adopted to achieve their aim. As will be seen later, when we discuss parents attitudes to being pressurised or pestered by their children they were fairly confident that they did not give in to pestering. There was for some children the awareness that fathers would give in more easily than mothers. Mothers it would seem are more adept at dealing with repeated

requests for certain items. Fathers tolerance levels appeared to be much lower and on the surface looked like they gave in more easily as the following extracts demonstrate:

Rodney: Ask your dad.

J: Who thinks that dad might give in more than mum?

Rodney: 'cos they're lazy and they can't um they don't like to put up an argument.

Frederick: They can't be bothered to go in to town they could give you money to go in town or something.

J: Is that mum or dad?

[They all say Dad].

Gilbert: They're too lazy to put up an argument.

With this group the option seemed to be go to mum and then if mum won't budge try dad. (There was this undertone that fathers generally don't do very much and they were a softer option.)

J: In terms of what you do get who decides what you're going to have is that mum or dad who generally says yes or no who would you go to?

Tamara: First I'd go to mum.

[Chorus of yes from the others.]

J: All of you.

Tamara: Then if not mum, dad's normally lazing around watching football and he'll say go on then he'll do anything.

This conversation with 7-8 year-old boys was illuminating in terms of the awareness that they had developed as to what tactics they needed to deploy to achieve the required outcome. They were clearly aware that parents ultimately did not want them

to be left out so they had to get them too feel sorry for them to try and weaken their resolve:

Pooper: You'd have to say please everyone else has got them in the school.

J: Why would that make a difference?

Pooper: 'Cos you'd be left out.

J: And they wouldn't want you to be left out?

[Unanimous no]

Alex: They'd feel sorry for you.

J: Why would they feel sorry for you?

Alex: Because they'd know if you wanted them and if you haven't got them and everybody else has got them you might feel left out.

J: Right. And mum's don't like you being left out?

Alex: No.

One 8-year-old girl went further and suggested:

101: Just tell them that you're being teased or something at school.

J: And would that make your mum change her mind?

101: It might do.

J: Because why wouldn't she want...?

101: ...because she'd feel sorry for you.

When talking to children about what parents did or did not buy some of them talked of the contradictions that occurred with their parents in terms of what was bought Tia aged 11 for example said:

Tia: Sometimes she brings home she would bring something back which like I would want but I'd never ask because it's be like too much and then like "oh thank-you." Then I go in for something

which is like cheaper and it's oh you're not allowed that. Like ooh so like something that you've asked for you don't get but something that you haven't asked for you get.

J: So how do parents decide what you are going to get then how do you think they say yes what makes them say yes and what makes them say no?

Tia: The quality and the price.

Other studies suggest that it is not until early adolescence (12-15) that children have an entire repertoire of influence strategies (Palan and Wilkes, 1997). In this research however, children were very proficient in reading parents moods and were equally skilled in deploying pestering techniques at what was seen to be the optimum chance of success.

It would appear that some children see parents occasionally fickle decision making as a whim rather than realising that there are probably differing demands on the household budget at any given time. However, for both Jenna and Annie they could see that parents were focused on bigger projects within the home:

Jenna: Yeah sometimes if it's something like say it's like my birthday and I ask for a TV they would say wait 'til Christmas because they would have got more money because right now we have an extension so it's a bit hard to like to go on holidays or something so I still do get what I want.

Annie: I get it depends how I behave but um I don't usually get pocket money a week now [a family holiday was imminent]...it just goes on to our um 'cos we put money towards our holidays so we've got more money to spend on holiday.

Some of the children had developed fairly sophisticated levels of reasoning about why parents might say no and this was often not due to the cost or not having enough money but for more practical reasons as Scott (11) from West Street illustrates:

Scott: I wouldn't feel too upset actually because it depends on like if your parents have got like enough money for it and hamsters aren't that much but there's like reasons about why you can't have stuff.

J: So it's not always about money then, it's not always whether you have enough money or lots of money?

Scott: Yeah 'cos my mum won't let me have a pet she says that I won't look after it and to tell the truth because I play football and I think I would look after it but I just wouldn't give it enough attention.

Laura from the same School also demonstrates that it is more than just the money as to why her parents won't buy her a horse:

Laura: Um it's sort of like I still really really want one but then again it is quite like fair on my parents 'cos they don't really have enough money to buy one nowhere to keep it and I don't really have the experience to ride well I do but not...

Generally the evidence from this study was that children in all groups were well aware of the strategies that needed to be deployed to ensure they get the consumer goods they wanted. There was no evidence that pestering was any less effective in either locale.

Influences on children's choice of consumer goods

When asked how they decide what they wanted for Christmas and birthdays the majority of the children cited a multi-national store catalogue, Argos, as their source of inspiration for choosing toys and games. Amongst these groups of children this catalogue is indeed the set text. Repeatedly the store catalogue came up in conversations and this was a real source of inspiration in identifying items that they might wish to have in the future. Other research has also found the Argos catalogue is a dominant source of inspiration and identification of potential gifts. Miller (1998) suggests that parents also encouraged their children's engagement with the catalogue

as they could set boundaries in terms of what price range children could work within when identifying items they wanted. Using a catalogue as a means of identifying potential presents was also seen as less tedious than having to take children in to large stores to physically choose presents.

The children were well aware that the layout of the catalogue facilitated access directly to girls and boys toys. The company's idea of using colour coded sectioning in the catalogue to differentiate products was seen by the children as both positive and helpful. In terms of effectiveness it would seem that this Argos knows exactly how to get their message across to their young consumers. The following discussion took place with Class 1 at West Street School:

J: How do you decide what things you want for birthday or Christmas do you take notice of what your friends have or television or see it in the shops?

Britney: Argos catalogue.

[Others then join and say yeah Argos catalogue].

J: Do you, so do you all know about the Argos catalogue?

[Unanimous Yes].

J: What's good about the Argos catalogue?

Harriet: It's got like, it's like colour coded the toys are blue or green the jewellery's red....

J: So is it colour coded for boys and girls?

Harriet: No it's colour coded so you know what's what.

J: It's easier to find things is it?

Harriet: Yes.

J: What makes it easier to find things?

Britney: Well they use like colours, all the pages are different colours all the toy pages, all the Barbie pages they're pink.

[Others say yeah].

J: And you think...

Britney: And Thomas the Tank engine pages are blue.

J: Do you think that's a good thing?

101: Yeah 'cos it's easier to find things like if you want to try and buy a doll then you look on to the pink pages.

J: How did you decide to have a scooter?

Britney: Because I saw it in the um Argos or Index catalogue and then I, I just spotted it and I said yeah that'd probably be a lot more better than a bike.

Irrespective of class background the store catalogue came up time and time again. However, for the children in the lower income households, they also talked of other types of catalogues where you order and buy goods but pay for them in instalments. None of the children in the more affluent area mentioned this type of catalogue as an influence in what they wanted to buy.

J: Right so where would you look for things where do you choose things?

Tracy: In the catalogue.

J: What kind of catalogues?

Tracy: Any ones. If it's Christmas presents I look in Argos and Index and I look in my Nan's next door neighbour's catalogue but I don't know what it's called.

Shops also were discussed quite often with this question and the favourite shops were often sports shops that sold the named/labelled sports type wear. Television

advertising hardly ever came up with the children in terms of what motivated them to want things.

Rodney: No they have clothes in there and shoes and things. JJB sports.

J: Which one would you say influenced you most?

Frederick: JJB

Rodney: JJB for sports clothes.

Fashion and clothes choice was limited to one or two high street stores, who also happened to be the market leaders for this age group. The marketing and advertising strategies for these stores are clearly effective in reaching their target audience and these young people were clearly communicating and engaging with the stores' advertising messages. Multi-national stores such as 'Tammy', JJB Sports and Claire's Accessories sell not just clothes and accessories but arguably sell an image, which, is engaging and fashionable for children to buy into. These shops are a form of theatre where they can go and experiment with clothes, make-up and fashion accessories whilst they listen to Britney Spears and S Club 7. The stores are a safe, bright and clean environment where children can, albeit for a brief period of time, escape into another world, where given the resources they could construct another identity. Shopping it seems, may allow individuals to buy an identity through certain products and brands. Arguably these methods of merchandising are a conflation of both popular culture and consumer culture with the market providing the experts as to what is in vogue, what to wear and what to be seen in. For this age group the experts are Tammy, Claire's accessories and Girl Heaven and they have all focused their advertising and their merchandising to young children, which has resulted in the optimum medium to maximise sales.

Pocket money

For children early socialisation into economic and monetary matters is often routed through pocket money. The majority of children in this study were receiving some form of pocket money that was given sometimes on an unconditional basis. However, in the main pocket money was usually linked to earning money through routine domestic chores or for good behaviour. Additionally, in a large proportion of children in the West Street area pocket money was linked to academic success for good reports, S.A.T.S. results or spelling and maths tests. As the drive for educational success was accepted by the children this was a very strong ethic that even the Year 4 children had fully adopted and they had learnt very clearly that success often brings a monetary reward. Another big difference at this school in terms of money was the notion of saving for holidays, which for many was imminent due to the advent of the summer break.

Money for the children in East Street School was given by parents, often on a daily basis and there seemed to be an immediacy about spending it. Educational success did not appear to be financially rewarded in this area as it was in the West Street area. It also seemed as if the supply of money could be fairly erratic and therefore children had learnt to spend it as they got it. There were, of course, some children who talked of saving their money to purchase more expensive items such as Playstation games and other types of computer games, however, overall there was much more of a spend culture for children at East Street School. This last point was also interesting given that the Headteacher had said in an earlier discussion that the parents of many of the children attending the school lived very much from week to week. This was also borne out in some of the interviews with the parents when they talked about their

household budget and what they spent on children's items. The school knew when to ask for money for trips. They knew not to ask on a Monday because there would be no money left from the weekend. For families receiving state benefits their money was not usually collected until the Tuesday or Wednesday so the school had learnt to make their requests for money on days when they thought it was likely that parents had received their income for that week.

Other major differences was the regularity of particular levels of income for example, one 11 year old (and his sister) attending West Street School was given an allowance by his paternal grandparent of £10 a month, which increased each year according to their age. This money was sent in the form of a cheque and once a month the children paid it into their bank accounts. The whole socialisation of children into monetary and economic matters was a totally different experience for many of the children attending West Street School than it was for those attending East Street School.

In East Street School the supply of money appeared to be unpredictable and it was quite difficult to identify the levels of, or if any, pocket money the children were receiving. The range was much wider varying from one pound per day to five pounds a week. In West Street School the range of pocket money received varied from nothing to six pounds a week. The average was one pound and fifty pence. Rachel in this School made her peers gasp when she announced that she received six pounds a week pocket money. This was the highest weekly amount that any child in the study was receiving on a regular basis and certainly generated discussion amongst the other children and in some cases resulted in dissatisfaction with their levels of pocket money. On closer analysis of Rachel's situation, she had only started to receive this

amount since her parents had separated and her father was now giving Rachel and her sibling £5 a week each. This was a bone of contention with Rachel's mother who thought it was too much and also that Rachel's father had only started giving them this amount since he had left the family home. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter 7 where in many cases a lot of parents' differences are being played out through the children and often routed in economic resources and material possessions.

Likewise another child at the same school said that his grandparent had given him and each of his two siblings £100 each to spend on their Disney holiday. The children talked freely about money. It was discussed in quite a matter of fact way by both the adults and children alike, whereas, in East Street School money was often discussed within the context of families not having enough to buy them the things they would have liked. In terms of pocket money they would often talk of the supply being inconsistent or for many they would get so much a day as the following quotations demonstrate:

Kane: Yeah my gran gives me about 3 or 4 pound, sometimes I does jobs for her because she's a bit old and I get about £2 for that and I gets about £4 off her and it depends when she gets her money.

J: Right does she give you that every week or just sometimes?

Kane: But if she hasn't got much money she might um give me 2 pound extra the next week.

Daniella: Well I don't get it a week I get about a pound a day and like um at the end of the week I get about a couple of quid.

This data would concur with Shropshire and Middleton's work (1999) who suggest that children living in income support families are three times more likely to be given pocket money irregularly than other children. Similarly children from lone parent

families are twice as likely to receive their pocket money at irregular intervals as children in two parent families (Shropshire and Middleton, 1999).

For the children in East Street School then, money was not as predictable as it was for the children in West Street School, therefore children at East Street appeared to be seizing the opportunity to enjoy it whilst they had some money. This could be linked in to Bourdieu's idea that for the working classes, money is about immediacy of material necessity (Lane 2000). Children in lower income households where income was often sporadic and arguably had developed an economic habitus based on spending money once you got it because it may not appear again for a while. This ethos was also part of the school strategy where the headteacher's comments that money for school trips had to be requested on the day after benefits payments had been made to ensure the best chance of securing payment. The whole community it seems was working within the confines of the erratic supply of money and the many demands required of a limited pot of money. It could be argued that this may mean children develop a negative relationship to the role and use of money as they progress into adulthood. Lone parents are the most likely group to discuss family budgets and share anxieties about money and this is probably due to the absence of another adult with whom to discuss such matters (Shropshire and Middleton, 1999). As Kempson *et al.* (1994) suggest adults who are careful money managers are likely to have picked up their money management skills from their parents. Furnham (1986) suggests that working class parents introduce pocket money later and more erratically than middle-class parents. However, his earlier work in 1984 revealed fewer class differences in terms of the economic socialisation of children. This is not the case in this study

where clear differences in supply, use and economic socialisation processes with money emerged between the two groups.

Concluding comments

Undertaking research with the children directly has yielded some rich data, most markedly in terms of being able to focus specifically on children of this age in trying to understand how they interact with contemporary consumerism and also how they are apparently using material possessions to express aspects of their identity. I have tried to demonstrate that children are not passive recipients of that process. They actively negotiate their way through both the world of adults decision making as well as managing, sorting and filtering the many messages they receive about the various aspect of consumer culture. Moreover, the most significant aspect of this research is that it demonstrates for the majority of these children consumer goods are signifiers of inclusion into certain groups. The possessions also served as passports into the world of friends to secure peer approval (Middleton *et al.* 1994). The discomfort of not having particular items for some is felt on a daily basis and is often a source of ridicule.

As adults we can sometimes choose to follow different paths and to make choices about how we live our lives. Children, however, do not have that luxury. For children their family of origin is for a large tranche of their lives what they have to operate within and it is from this basis that children carve out their niche in the world. Living in a media-saturated society with all the subliminal messaging that goes with such a society wanting to have the possessions that signify acceptance and inclusion seems to be a justifiable and understandable part of childhood.

The problem that arises when inclusion into particular groups is based on consumer goods is that, children who live in families where economic resources are scarce the effort to keep up with consumer trends is continuous and unrelenting. I want to leave the last words to Tracy and Tez to sum up the consumption process as they see it. Ironically as Tracy and Tez are learning the ever shifting sands of consumerism means that as soon as you get the item that you think will be your passport to peer culture they move the goalposts and those symbols are as illusory as they ever were:

Tracy: I really wanted these trainers and I sees them on my friends like Claire and all that and then we ask our mum, begs 'em and then Christmas comes you get it and you go into School and they've got a different make it's like...

Tez:...I thought it was sly 'cos they've got it so early and they can afford it and we can't because my mum says we can't.

From the children's perspective this data suggests inequality impacts on consumption in a number of ways which has a knock-on effect in terms of children's lived experiences. The range of activities and affiliations to clubs and societies were significantly skewed in the more affluent area. Even allowing for minor inconsistencies the differences are still very stark. The age of the child was also significant in that both the children themselves and their parents felt that the pressure to buy branded goods was going to increase as the children entered the secondary phase of their education. Given that families on lower incomes have less resources to manage, as Middleton *et al.* (1994) suggests, this must place disproportionate demands in terms of what they can provide for their children. The 'teasing' culture that was so ingrained in the East Street area was pronounced and a lot of the ridicule

was attached to having certain material goods. It is not surprising then that children repeatedly ask for particular items. Ultimately, it appears that parents do feel the pressure to give in and buy a branded product rather than a cheaper alternative. Children of all ages in the East Street area were aware of the often erratic supply of money and were also aware that they were unable to participate in certain activities such as school trips or buy particular items because of the lack of resources within their familial home. As Daniella's conversation with her friend highlighted earlier in this chapter there appeared to be things that children felt entitled to but were unable to have such as a holiday.

Consumption is a central feature of contemporary western societies and the evidence from this part of the study is that, for children, consumer goods are an important part of their social and personal networks. As we will see in Chapter 7 parents are well aware of the importance of the role of material possessions in their children's lives. It appears that for both children and their parents the pressures to 'keep up' with the cycles of consumerism is unrelenting.

Chapter 7

Parents: Data and Discussion

Having looked at the issues and themes that emerged from working with the children in this research the focus now shifts from the child's to the parent's viewpoint. Due to the age group of the children (7-11 years) it was necessary to get some level of insight from the parents' perspective because it was envisaged that to some degree parents as the ultimate purchasers of many of their children's consumer goods, would be censoring their children's acquisition and exposure to certain material possessions.

Children are often integral to the negotiating processes between parents and the world of consumerism. This research looked at those negotiating aspects from primarily the children's perspective but then triangulated that data by asking the children's parents how they made sense of the process. Parents were also asked on what their decisions were based for buying (or not) the material possessions that they bought for their children. Many of the questions explored similar themes to those that the children were asked to try and establish any differences between the adult perspective and the child's perspective and to try to understand more fully this particular link in the consumption chain.

Individual interviews took place with 19 parents. The sample consisted of seven mothers and 2 fathers in the West Street area and six mothers and 2 fathers in the East Street area. Additionally, and in order to overcome the difficulties in men volunteering to be interviewed 2 other fathers from outside of the areas were interviewed in order to try and balance the gender split.

Household structures were as follows:

Household structure	West Street	East Street	Other Area
Lone Mother	1	0	0
Lone Father	0	2	0
Reconstituted (step)	1	2	0
2 Parents	7	4	2

n=19

The average number of children living in each household was slightly higher in West Street (2.62) compared to East Street (2.5). For many of the parents they had come from families where the number of children in their immediate family was higher than they had subsequently had themselves. The majority of the parents in the sample had only two or three children. Parents generally felt that their children had higher levels of material possessions than they had received in their own childhoods. The increase in the levels of consumer goods that their children had was attributed to smaller family sizes and improved standards of living in recent decades.

The main themes that emerged from the interviews with the adults were the increased level of peer pressure that they felt their children were under and this appeared to impact on their decisions as an adult to follow certain crazes, for example 'Furbies, Pokemon and Beanie Babies.' Money and the cost of particular items, changes to children's consumer goods and particularly the huge technological shifts with children's toys and the erosion of more traditional types of toys and family entertainment were also themes that emerged. The notion of risk was also a concern with the perception of children having to retreat from the public space of playing

outside of their homes and in parks because of the perceived threat of stranger danger. These risks had resulted in children having to withdraw into the private world of the home and a subsequent need for children to occupy themselves in different ways. Generally parents viewed the world out there as too risky a place to leave children unsupervised and this then impacted on how children could socialise and entertain themselves.

In all cases there were very high levels of negotiation going on between adults and children regarding consumer goods. In the vast majority of families children generated the ideas for presents and even where parents were not in favour of their children having particular items or in some cases totally against certain games, toys or fads they all admitted to having given in at some stage. Their submission was justified because either “it was all the child wanted or was asking for” (pester power) or ultimately they had felt that children were being left out. At some level this last point was clearly evoking feelings and anxieties in parents from both groups. Parents across both social class groups ultimately did not want their child to be marginalised from their peers because of the lack of fashionable toys or games. This last point was an issue and many parents reported they could not maintain the level of anxiety this evoked for very long periods of time. For example this parent from West Street who held strong views about not buying certain games or toys just because they were in fashion, did, after a long battle concede to allow her child to have Pokemon cards:

J: Is that something that you probably wouldn't have bought?

Gina: Oh definitely! There's no way I'd have bought that.

J: Right so what made you kind of give in to that or say yeah okay?

Gina: Because everybody's got them and you don't want your child to be different.

Likewise this parent from East Street says a similar thing when justifying a particular purchase:

Sally: I think so...because of like where I wasn't exactly going without but I know like the same really with Phoebe, with what other kids have got. I want to make sure that she has got something like, so she doesn't feel left out like what everybody else has got.

This parent from West Street went one step further and was ahead of her daughter in terms of wanting to be included and stated that her daughter didn't necessarily want all the up to date things but she felt that she wanted her to, as an insurance for peer inclusion at school:

Catherine: I like to try and keep her up to date um you know so as she fits in with the crowd at school I like her to try and but Grace is very, I wouldn't say stubborn, but she's very set in her ways. Sometimes she just doesn't want to be up to date but I, I try and keep her.

J: Why do you, why is that, that's obviously important to you why is that an important thing?

Catherine: I think if you don't fit in you get left out of the crowd and I want her to be part of the crowd if you know what I mean.

J: Right but she obviously doesn't feel that?

Catherine: Not overly no. I push it more than she wants it really.

So in the example of Catherine the issue was not one of the child making demands or raising concerns about owning certain items but this was an issue for the parent who in turn was projecting it on to her daughter.

What parents buy and why

Parents were asked how and what their decisions were based on when buying items for their children. All of the parents in both groups either directly or indirectly related

their decision to purchase an item based on its educational value. Certainly in West Street, which was the more affluent area, education came out time and time again, and as has already been discussed in Chapter 6, all the children in this area had the education message firmly embedded into their thought processes. All parents spoke of the need for children to have certain educational toys as a must to ensure success within their formal education. Parents in the less affluent area spoke of needing to have these items so as their children did not get left behind in the education system. In the majority of interviews parents listened to children's requests and it was generally the children that drove the process. Parents did, however, vet the requests broadly around the following criteria:

- i) Value for money;
- ii) Education;
- iii) Use-value. Parents wanted to be sure that children would not get bored with the item relatively quickly. They didn't want to be buying things on a whim.
- iv) The item that children were requesting was something that they really wanted and had repeatedly requested it. Parents felt that children asked for things all the time and on many occasions they would forget about an item if the parent didn't pick up on it straight away. This was an interesting dynamic because as I have just discussed in Chapter 6 the children were very aware and very adept in realising that in order to get something you often had to repeatedly ask for that item.
- v) A few parents mentioned the fun factor of certain items. There were some parents who said that in the end they were children and to an extent you had to go along with fads.

Overall parents stated that the bigger the educational dimension the higher the chance of them buying a certain item for example all of these parents were from the East Street area:

Bev: Well they tend to tell us what they like and you know we sort of decide whether it's appropriate for the age really. Um it's like my eldest daughter got her own computer and that but she's coming up for GCSE work so we thought that would be a good thing, plus Paige is doing it over primary school so buying that isn't...what can I say...it's an educational need then. If it's educational then we do buy loads of stuff like that but obviously we buy the Barbie's for Paige she has all that but then she plays hours and they reckon they through play anyway don't they so that's important?

Liz: ...it depends how badly they want it um the more educational the better Mia's been after a keyboard for a while so we decided to get her one for her birthday this year. That's fairly educational she likes music she enjoys music at school and it's not one of these five-minute fads. She's been on about it for a couple of years now about having a keyboard preferably she'd want a piano but... [laughs] that's a bit out of our price range so we thought yeah it's a good idea to get her keyboard. 'Cos it'll give her something different to do another interest you know um yeah the more educational the better.

Parents from West Street also came out with the same rationale for buying certain items:

June: Yeah I mean it's like um computer games if they had educational value it'd be at least twice more likely to get them than if it was just for entertainment. I don't mind buying her books she's into reading I'll buy her books even though they might cost a lot, she reads them quickly. I will buy her things like books because of their educational value.

Stephanie: No we don't use it (the computer) for games they've got to use them for writing or something a bit educational like S.A.T. tests.

This same parent also went on to discuss how her ex-partner's whole ethos towards what toys their children had was completely bound up with their educational value. There had clearly been tensions around this issue between the parents but it appeared that the mother had tried to compensate for this over zealous screening and had to

some degree attempted to ensure the children had more of a balance between education and just playing for fun or enjoyment.

Stephanie: I think they must notice a difference because we tend to I mean I don't know whether he's doing it because we've done it but we've got the Playstation and we're the ones that seemed to spend money on them. Whereas he used to, everything was educational which I don't knock but that would come before anything else to the point of not spending money but having things second-hand things just as long as they're educational he wouldn't have anything that wasn't educational. So he wouldn't have a Playstation because there's no education value.

Even the 'in' craze toy at the time was justified on the basis of its perceived educational value. James justified his decision to allow his son to participate in the Pokemon craze that was raging at the time of the interviews based on its educational dimension,

James: I mean they've had, they've had a lot of good fun and entertainment out of it and as I say there's a certain amount of educational value and there's the social skills of just swapping and bartering and doing all that so although people sort of slam it it's actually quite good in many ways it's quite good. You could actually link it up to the curriculum if you want to for all the skills that it might teach you and you could probably put it forward as an educational toy eventually if you wanted to.

This parent from the same area also gave a good example of how consumer goods are used as rewards for academic success and how this impacts on the child's peers:

Sally: It's like they've just done their S.A.T.S. and apparently somebody's been promised a Gameboy colour if they get a level...a level 5 I think it is and she said can I have that?

At some level this whole discourse of education was very deeply ingrained and all parents attached a great deal of importance to their children's education. The education system itself had financial implications whether it be about school trips or being able to provide computers for children to develop and maintain technological

skills. Often when people are apparently on the treadmill of consumption, buying into certain advertising messages is often cast in a negative light such as 'keeping up with the Jones's'. In this study however there was a high level of awareness amongst all parents that chances of educational success are enhanced by additional factors over and above basic education provision. Generally, parents were wanting their children to have the very best chance possible of success in the education system. For many parents they realised that in order to maximise their children's chances of success they had to try and provide additional educational aids such as computers, musical instruments and participation in school trips.

Parents' own childhood experiences

A very strong theme that emerged from the pilot study was how much parents were reflecting back to their own experiences from their childhood as a means of contrasting today's consumer pressures and experiences with their children's experiences today. Parents in the main study were asked to compare their own childhood experiences with that of their children for example, did they see any differences in what their own children had in comparison to what they would have been given as a child? For the majority of the parents in both groups they saw huge shifts in the types of toys that were available and particularly the considerable growth in technological toys. This particular trend had also resulted in a big jump in the cost of what types of toys and games children wanted and the economic ramifications of this in terms of having to provide children with these items.

These parents were all from the West Street area:

James: I think it's more the electronics side of things you know electronic games and toys really yeah 'cos we tend to have things like Action Men more static things to play with. I mean our games and our toys were much more in to make believe and making stories

about things and playing with those particular toys rather than being entertained by them which some of the games do these days.

June: I think you look for more things to occupy them to keep them busy indoors but I think as well they are just not content with the sort of pastimes we had like...painting and colouring-in and well simple things like playing cards...

J: So the games have moved on as well...?

June:...yeah but I think possibly that's because...you know people's financial situations have moved on haven't they? I mean when I was a child people didn't have the money all you had was colouring books, cards and so children utilised them and I suppose now 'cos parents have got the money to buy the toys children utilise that. I suppose now I think that they just take advantage of whatever is around....(laughs nervously) actually.

Parents in the East Street area also had similar thoughts on how things had changed:

Mike: Oh it is nowadays isn't it it's not like when we was kids like you got what you got that's what you had like, but nowadays everybody has to keep up with the fashions and with the new toys that's out. All this computer game stuff and everything like you know. When we was a...when I was a child it was you know make do with what you got sort of thing. You know at least you could go out and you never had none of this computer stuff and all the technology that they get nowadays.

Jenny : Childhood was better then because you just made do you didn't know any other. I think childhoods were just happier you played simple games whereas today they don't seem to you know they seem to want...like the Playstations or Rollerblades or BMX's and things like that you know. Whereas it's as if they are not happy unless they've got what everybody else has got.

Parents also talked of buying based on emotional hooks of their own memories about receiving something they particularly wanted as a child or what they felt like if they were denied it. These memories and feelings were often the catalyst for ensuring their children did not have the same positive/negative experiences associated with Christmas and birthdays. This parent from West Street illustrates this point very nicely when she said:

Sally: I always had a lot of toys Christmas, birthdays I always had loads and then my parents split up so then I had double like so I feel I want to give that to her as well. I know how excited I was Christmas and birthdays and it's, when she comes down in the mornings and sees the presents it's like wow you know and that's how I was and that's how I want her to be.

This parent from the East Street area relayed her mother's feelings of only being able to afford to buy second-hand toys and that this had motivated her to try and give her children all the things her mother couldn't give to her:

Jenny: When I was younger there wasn't a lot of money around and...I can remember my mother having to hand toys for us which she didn't have any other choice but she felt really bad buy second-about it. And I think...I've just gone totally the other way. Whereas if I can get it for 'em they can have it I'm sorting of making up for what I never had.

Contemporary childhood, risk and consumption

About one quarter of the parents linked the notion of how entertainment and leisure time has had to change for children. These changes were seen to be due to parents' perceptions that the world had become a much riskier place for children to grow up in. In the minds of the parents traditional forms of entertainment had therefore retreated from the public arena to the private arena with home becoming a panoptical space where children could be 'supervised' at all times. As James *et al.* (1998) assert children are arguably more hemmed in by surveillance and social regulation than ever before. In line with other literature in the area, amusements and leisure time have also changed to offer children 'safer spaces' in which to entertain themselves Livingstone (1998). Furnishing homes and more specifically children's bedrooms with media and technological entertainment Livingstone argues, offers children a diverting, technological rich alternative to the perceived risks of the outside world. Parents in this research reinforced that view and many reported there had been a big shift in

children participating in home entertainment leisure activities, for example, watching more television, increased use of videos and music systems. All these activities were seen as a safer leisure option and have all resulted in children's changing experiences in how they use their leisure time and the types of consumer goods they use to entertain themselves. The notion of 'stranger danger' is in fact directly influencing adults and consequently children's behaviour in terms of what they can and cannot do (Scott *et al.* 1999). The risk issue was of no less concern in either area. Both groups of interviews brought similar issues up surrounding this aspect of the research. For example, these parents from West Street commented:

June: Um I think we used to play outside with other children a lot more we used to go off for hours and if we were indoors we played with each other. Perhaps even more because I was one of four, and I think perhaps we played with each other more or we played on our own for hours

J: So that's...your children are not they don't go outside as much or they do...?

June: No I think as they've got older as they get to sort of year 6,7 I give them more freedom certainly not as young children no. I suppose when we were 7 or 8 we were allowed the freedom of the locality, which they wouldn't be now.

J: Because?

June: Well just because there's more traffic there's more sort of stranger danger um and there's not other children out there playing you know there's always lots of other children that they....and of course now there's not and I think that's the biggest danger is children out on their own I think if they are in groups they are sort of a lot safer.

These parents from the East Street area also expressed similar concerns about safety and the fears that some of them felt in allowing children to be out playing unsupervised or for long periods of time. These fears were not just about 'stranger danger' but also about other fears within the community. For example, what sorts of

things children would be doing if they were left to play outside (particularly at night) to amuse themselves.

Mike: I used to like playing in the woods quite a lot when I was little but you know it's not safe for 'em to do nowadays whereas I think they're more orientated sat in front of the box nowadays. OK Felix likes to go out and play football he goes out and does that but soon as they come home like it's put a video on or go play a game and stuff like that you know. In our days it was like home change and out you go sort of thing which was a lot safer then anyway like it is now I know Felix is coming up for 12 but I still worry. I say to him be in at a time and if he's a bit late I think oh you know 'cos it's not very safe nowadays but if not come up with me but he don't like that you know well "my mates can stay out 'til like 9/10 o'clock at night." I give him a set time I do worry who he hangs around with you know some new friends I try to talk to 'em find out what they are like you know 'cos don't want him to get in to trouble or whatever like.

Elaine, however also from the East Street area had adopted a totally different stance on this notion of risk. The interview was memorable because she was the only parent who spoke so candidly and appeared to be very unaware of the discourse of risk that so many parents are operating within. For this parent she was schooling her children for independence rather than cosseting them or as she says towards the end of this part of the interview "not keeping them tied to their mother's apron strings".

Elaine: You know I always say nice day get out to play and believe me they do their out and once we start getting nice weather if we do I tell you now all my kids can swim. They'll be down swimming from 9.00 in the morning right this is going back on last year they only come up when their stomachs rumbling a quick jam sandwich whatever. I've come back and found bread, jam butter scattered everywhere out the door and their back down swimming back up for tea something to eat and they're back down again.

J: So there's no restriction on them?

Elaine: There's no restriction on 'em there's a restriction on what time they come in I like to know where they are...the other kids they're going to be tied to their mother's apron strings and depend on their parents I think that's only way I'm thinking you know.

In Chapter 4 I discussed the changes that have occurred within the contemporary discourses of childhood, one of which is this increase in the perception of risks in public spaces to children. Playing outside, as it seems, has been steadily displaced by domestic entertainment particularly via televisions and computers (Buckingham, 2000). This perception of risk in the majority of parents' minds does, it seems, have a constraining effect on children's freedoms and activities and certainly is at the forefront of parents' minds when they are discussing the changing nature of children's leisure and entertainment in contemporary society. However, I also said in Chapter 5 from looking at the children's diaries there appears to be a contradiction here between what the children are saying they are doing and how the parents are perceiving the risks involved. Children's actual lived experiences do include sizeable chunks of time where they do play outside of the home in parks and fields with other children and unsupervised by adults. Whether those risks are real or imagined they have now become real in their consequences (Thomas, 1927) which is impacting on wider discourses of children's play and leisure activities.

Parents' views on children's peer cultures

According to the parents, peer pressure was the biggest influence on children to want things. The majority of parents felt that this aspect of children's lives was much more pervasive than they had remembered it for themselves. The parents themselves, who were aware of peer pressure arguments as a rationale for responding to children's requests but who also wanted to resist giving in, ultimately felt that they needed to go along with it to ensure their children did not feel marginalised. These parents from East Street commented:

Bev: I think, I think that at this time I mean when I was younger I didn't feel there was any pressure but I think now there's like magazines and you must do that, you must do that and I think there is a lot of pressure at school now. Where if well just say Fred Bloggs walks in with all Nike things on and then you've got someone else with market stuff on exactly the same but because it hasn't got Nike on that child would be sort of victimised and I've seen it done as well.

Lisa: I never had a new bike you know being the last one um and I don't feel that I went without I don't I remember being miffed or cross that I went without but I know, but then there wasn't the advertising and there wasn't the peer pressure. I don't feel like I want them to have what I never have because I didn't feel as if I missed out on anything but I do feel at times that I would like to do things for them because they are under peer pressure I appreciate more what they are going through.

Parents in the more affluent area, even though they were well aware of the issues and group dynamics involved within friendship circles and playground cultures respected that the peer pressure issue was hard for children to deal with. In contrast to Middleton *et al's*. (1994) work there was no evidence from the parents in the West Street area to suggest that they were any less likely to resist the pressure from children to buy certain items. Generally they were as aware as less well off parents that to a certain extent you have to go along with trends to ensure children were not excluded.

Jill: But yeah it's peer pressure as well and you've got to go with the flow really [laughs].

Catherine: Um I just think they, they've just got a lot of pressure from peer pressure I mean as I said especially from at this school. But obviously if other parents are going to keep giving in to the children letting them have whatever they want it's going to get worse and worse.

James: Well it is the like, the amount of pressure to have these things it's more it's I would consider it to be bad, worse now than it was because there is such a lot more pressure. And it's this constant changing as well you know kids have got to have something new rather than making do with something.

Peer group networks were then having an impact on adults (parents) behaviour in response in response to the pressure children were perceived to be under from their peers. In Bourdieu's terms it could be argued that the peer group was a strong 'field' in the mediating of children's relationships with their peers and consumption.

Age and transition to secondary school

In line with other studies, from interviews with the Year 6 children it became apparent very early on that the transition from primary to secondary school heralded a change that was of great importance to the children (James, 1999). The children were very anxious particularly in the East Street area that they would have the correct signifiers of inclusion in the guise of consumer goods when they moved in to secondary education. The parents also saw this as a key milestone in that up until this point they were able to resist children's requests for particular brands or labels. Even though they were not directly asked a question on this topic the majority of parents related to it in terms of things getting worse as children got older particularly in having to buy certain products. Both verbally and non-verbally the boundary lines have been drawn, certainly in the minds of the parents of when they will give-in and what branded goods they will buy. Many of the parents saw that there would be an inevitability of having to conform and buy labels, brands and what are often referred to as designer clothes as children progress into adolescence. For example the following quotations were from parents in the West Street area:

June: Harriet's not really....she's aware of styles but not labels I think a lot of that is personality things as well because with boys um the eleven year old couldn't care less really but I know lots of his friends could so I think it's just that he's not the type of person who cares one way or another. The fourteen year old likes labels not over the top but I suppose in some respects once they get to a sort of secondary school age I nearly encourage...I think they don't want to be different to their friends so I'm not going to make them different

so if everyone's wearing an Adidas tee-shirt then I would pay for an Adidas tee-shirt so as they don't feel left out of in the peer group really.

J: Right but you obviously see that as an age related thing as well?

June: I think it is yeah definitely...

J: ...for the older ones?

June: I think it is yeah definitely a secondary school age thing.

Jill: Oh yeah definitely clothes I mean if they want something you know obviously these days it's designer stuff left, right and centre then you...

J: Do they have labels and things?

Jill: They do yeah not everything no but you know there was a craze back of wearing like Adidas trousers and things like that so yeah they did have it but a they had all the others as well.

This parent from the East Street area who appeared to be on the lower level of household income of any of the parents interviewed was very aware of the financial pressures that lay ahead in being able to provide the eldest child with what he termed "designer stuff:"

Mike: That's it you know because you know if he's going to senior school soon he'll want this designer stuff you know like Nike trainers whatever you know he'll start wanting that soon by the time he's 13 that's when they start really then like we all did. But we didn't have all that sort of stuff that you've got now Nike stuff. We had Adidas you know but that was the year before I left and I thought great that's all I had really but nowadays all designer stuff everybody's going with it. Obviously it's right that I should try and do it for Ben as well 'cos all his mates have got it or else you get people like being nasty like if you know what I mean oh you haven't got it that's scabby or his clothes are decent. What I've got him like you know we've got to do what I can afford on the budget I've got like you know.

This parent also from the East Street area talked about her experiences of the shifts through different types of pressure relating particularly to age but also how she is seeing that being demonstrated with children as young as 4:

Lisa: I work with pre-school children and at 4 they put pressure on each other like I've got this have you got it you know they're 4! It's not healthy I don't think really but then that's the way it is. Aren't we [adults] more like that? Got to keep up with the Jones' I mean we don't we get on with ourselves I know my sister's very materialistic you know and her children have to have what everybody else has got regardless.

Consumer goods and the impact on the overall household budget

The aim of this research was to try and get a deeper understanding of how consumption impacts on children's lives and more specifically how it shapes their attitudes towards consumption depending on the economic climate of the families in which they live. The two geographical areas selected for this study were chosen because of a low or high deprivation indicator (Nelder and Maconachie, 1997). Whilst there were some significant differences in terms of household income it soon became apparent that even though there was extreme diversity in terms of disposable income the differences in what children owned were less significant. This is no surprise if we look at Middleton *et al's*. (1994) work where parents from poorer households went to even greater lengths to ensure their children were not stigmatised by their lack of appropriate consumer goods. What is interesting about this research is that there seems to be a direct correlation between parents' own experiences of what their parents did or did not provide and generally wanting it to be as good or better than they had. It was also recognised that, between this generation and their parents, household economics had changed quite dramatically. People were seen to be better off now than when these parents had been children and more help was seen to be

available for families who were not as well-off. Parents in neither area talked of the general increase in the levels of inequalities that we see today. For example only one parent talked of being worse-off in terms of income and that had been since he had assumed the role of lone parent. Other parents in both areas who had lived in less well-off families all spoke indirectly of their upward social mobility. For example, this parent from the East Street area stated:

Liz: I think it's basically people are better off now than they were back then I mean you hear people say that a lot of people even you know you hear on the television in the papers that Southside is a poor area but it's like my mother says nobody's poor these days. 'Cos if you're out of work you get benefits, you've got a roof over your head you've got a meal on the table at the end of the day you know. Whereas when she was little if her father was out work I mean my father, my mother's over 70 now if her father was out of work it was as simple as that they just didn't eat you know they didn't get clothes [laughs]. Well they didn't get clothes anyway everything was passed down from one you know to the other. I think that's basically what it is people are better off today there's more money around today and things are easier to come by than they used to be.

This is an extract from an interview with Gina in the West Street area who talked equally of harder times then compared to now:

Definitely I mean we're in a better position to give our children more. My mother was on her own and so we did have less...and I think in the beginning that's why he got too much because I was trying to compensate for the things that I didn't have. I think when I got married I wanted to do all the things that my mother hadn't done and don't get me wrong she was no way a bad mother but um she was on her own and um and we had to pitch in a whole lot at home. Like Sunday's we had to change the beds and we did cooking and we dusted and I mean at an early age I had to do my own ironing and I hated it and I thought you're not supposed to do this when you are a child.

In terms of household economics there was a much more relaxed approach with the parents from West Street to the whole issue of money and being able to buy certain things for their children. One of the questions the parents were asked was how easy or

how difficult did they think it was to provide their children with the things that they wanted? In the East Street area where families tended to be worse-off financially 6 out of 8 interviewees said they thought that it was hard or difficult to give children the things that they wanted. Without being prompted most talked of having to plan ahead for Christmas. One said she had already started saving towards Christmas and two had already started to purchase presents when the interviews took place in the July. One parent commented that it was “not too bad” in terms of financial pressure but she too had started to acquire Christmas presents 5 months ahead of the Christmas deadline. One other parent who was on an extremely tight budget said that he had to start buying in September to ensure all three children got the presents they wanted. One of the questions that this raises in terms of household finances is that for many parents they all spoke of not going in to debt to buy toys and presents. Yet, they appeared to be making incredibly big sacrifices and planned far in advance to ensure they could buy all the things that the children wanted. All these examples concur with Kempson *et al's* (1994) work on how poorer families juggle bill payments and plan ahead in order to ensure they can provide Birthday and Christmas presents for their children.

It seems to be the case that at some level parents are choosing to prioritise investing in consumer goods for their children over other lifestyle, personal or household needs. An example of this was evident in a household in the East Street area where the family, having lived there for two years still had no carpets on the floor yet every one of the 5 children had a television in their bedrooms. There was, in this household, also a television in the main room of the house and 3 of the children had their own games consoles. There was also some evidence of families in the East Street area of parents creating for the children like a ‘mini’ home within the home for children to have their own space and a means to spend their leisure time as adults might. This has been

achieved by children having their own televisions, music systems, and in the following two homes parents have also subscribed to cable television for their children's bedrooms:

Bev: TV, video, cable in their bedroom my oldest one would be magazines she watches a lot of MTV 'cos they've got cable in their bedroom as well, terrible 'int I? [This parent was half apologising for this as well as seemingly being quite pleased that she is able to provide these material comforts for her children].

This parent also was having financial difficulties with housing costs and some household bills but she was also paying for her children to have access to digital television in their bedroom:

Sharon: Oh she definitely, well she's got her own computer um she's got Sky connected now up in to her bedroom. I pay an extra 6 pound for it for her to have it in her bedroom.

J: Has she, why did you decide to do that?

Sharon: Because of there's like films down here that we'd want to watch which in some cases I don't think it's like suitable for her to watch so it means then that she can go upstairs and watch whatever she wants to watch. And they love cartoon channel but cartoon channel does get on my nerves um but saying that at the same time Brian keeps telling me I shouldn't let her watch 'Parkside'. But she absolutely adores Parks...not Parkside 'South Park' she absolutely adores South Park and as me mother says she is getting a bit bigger now she hears what they're saying on it outside so...yeah, whereas me youngest I don't let her watch it at all.

In the West Street area there was a very different response to the question how difficult/how easy is it for you to provide your children with the items that they want?

Three parents said it was "not difficult" or they didn't see it as a problem; two parents said it was not particularly difficult or it was "relatively easy;" the remaining three parents said it was either a struggle or quite difficult. However of those last three interviewees, one had recently separated from her partner so she was envisaging Christmas being more difficult this year than last. Even though this parent was

predicting it was going to be harder for her this year, jointly it was likely that the children would do very well because they would be getting presents from two sources instead of one. There was also contradictions between parents. For example, one of the parents who said that it was a “pressure” and quite hard the partner who had been interviewed separately replied “it was not difficult at all” to provide them with what they wanted. For this couple there was a definite split between whether they were going in to debt or just managing an overdraft. For example when talking about how easy or how difficult it was for to provide them with the things they wanted Gina stated:

[Long pause]...I suppose at this stage now it's not difficult.. and that doesn't say there's any money left at the end of the month we're always overdrawn.

The partner however gave the following response:

Chris: It's...I'm quite conservative with my spending so I mean it's not really that a ...I'm like a firm believer that unless you've got the money you can't afford it you know. I mean I wouldn't go in to credit at all the small things it's manageable and you know it's not easy but you know we can tolerate that but the large items you've got to think again for.

These better-off parents do not seem to see an overdraft as credit or debt in the same way as less well-off families did although they are often held up as examples of using credit or debt to purchase things for their children. This parent gave a good example of this when he talked about his sister who was a lone parent and in the financial position of having to use credit to buy her children certain items:

John: If I had my way it won't be sort of they won't just get everything they want but if times are going to go in another thirty years time I mean you know it's going to be that way isn't it? They're just going to get whatever they want um it, it seems to be a money is certain to become freer and credit for sure and I suppose single parent families are under a lot more pressure than, than um 2 parent families for sure yeah.

J: How do you think families with less income manage that?

John: I don't know I don't know my sister's in that position and she'd be, she would certainly go in to debt to do that type of thing. She's got 2 teenage girls at the moment and they're quite close together one's 16 and one's a 14 and so many months there's only like 15 months apart so they're very close together and yeah she finds it hard for sure.

Other parents in the West Street area commented that:

June: Not particularly difficult I wouldn't overspend a budget I wouldn't be one of these people who said oh my children must have £300 pounds each. You know if one needs a new bike then one can have a new bike but I don't feel obliged to spend you know £200 on the others. They have a bike when they need one.

James: Relatively easy for the most of the time it all depends on how much I want to spend or how much I want to allow them to spend really. I, I'm more likely to put a cap on it because I think it's an expensive item or whatever and say no we're not having it because I don't think it's worth the money basically.

J: Yeah but there's no kind of extra pressure or any issues around Christmas and those kind of things?

James: Not really.

For parents in the East Street area Christmas in particular was seen to be a particularly pressurised date in the economic calendar:

Liz: It is the same as Christmas times if he's got any chance of any overtime he'll do overtime to get the extra money in for Christmas. And she'll say then... and we'll say well if you want such and such for Christmas this is what you've got to put up with. Your dad's got to work extra hours to pay for what you want for Christmas.

Mike : Yes it is but like I bought that for Frederick for Christmas (points to a CD player) 'cos he wanted one cost me 36 pound whatever my daughter had a pram bought 'em some clothes but it's like I try and start from September if you know what I mean. I try and buy a bit each week you know I ask 'em what do you want for Christmas like you know and my youngest son he's on about a Scaletrix set but you know I'll have put money back each week or else just buy each item each week. You know buy one for one week and one for the other the other week you know it's like September time I've got to start getting ready for the Christmas you know what

I mean? So it's very difficult I've never been in this situation with such a low budget before you know 'cos I've always worked all my life I've always had money there like you know and spare as well like if they want to go somewhere. But now I can't do that you know that gets me down 'cos I think you know I want to do something for my children I'm doing what I can do at the moment.

Sharon: Um last Christmas wasn't bad I only went 70 quid in to debt last year I managed to like keep pennies back and save but the Christmas before I went in to 250 pound in to debt 'cos they wanted bikes.

J: When you say you go in to debt does that mean that you buy them on credit or you...?

Sharon: On a catalogue.

The evidence from the parents' comments suggests that in the West Street area there was not as much tension as regards money. Asking the same questions to both groups of parents generally elicited very different responses, reflections and perceptions on the ease or difficulty in providing children with the items that they requested. The whole tone of June's comment from West Street of "if one needs a new bike then one can have a new bike...they have a bike when they need one" did not seem to translate to the majority of the parents in the East Street area. The regularity and the level of income in each household clearly impacts on how much of the household budget can be allocated on children's material possessions and consumer goods and appeared to affect children's understanding of and attitudes towards money.

Advertising

From the parent's perspective after peer culture the second biggest influence on children to want certain items was advertising and primarily television advertising. This was a very different response to that of the children who rarely mentioned television advertising. Most parents, however, seem to accept the inevitability of television trying to get a message across but quite a lot were cynical about the

intensity of the advertising particularly around Christmas time. Recent media coverage of research into this issue is arguing that television advertising has little influence on children's real desire for consumer products, Furnham the author of the research states:

“It is not the advertising that harms children, but irresponsible parenting.”

(Carvel, November 11, 2000; p7).

The evidence from this research is that many parents in both social class groups are trying hard to balance children's requests for certain products against the awareness of knowing that much of the hype that surrounds advertising is about increased profits for multi-national companies. They are, to a point, reluctant to give-in to children's repeated requests that surrounds consumer culture but there comes a point where for their children's sake they do give in. If parents feel the child will get use from the item, that it is not just a whim and that it represents value for money then they are more likely to buy the product. Parents in this study did appear to reflect carefully on their decisions and the possible long-term implications of making those decisions. So their behaviour appears to be far removed from the moral positioning of Furnham's (2000) comments. Most of the parents interviewed in this study were well aware of the issues but were trying hard to steer a sensible and balanced path between children's exposure to advertising images whilst also ensuring that they did allow children certain symbols of inclusivity amongst their peers. For example, one parent from West Street said:

Jane: I don't like all this advertising because half the time they make these things out to be so wonderful you know and this is really good and this and this and this and when you actually look at it it's you know it's not what it makes it out. The children are so thing you know so hyped up about it and they want it and that it's very difficult sometimes to say well look you know look at it it's not that it doesn't do everything that adverts say I find that hard really. I

feel...I mean obviously the older ones can but Harriet's age are very much influenced I feel.

This parent had gone one step further and was trying to deconstruct the messages that many advertisements tried to portray, seeing the adverts as being very unrealistic or not really fulfilling the expectation the child would have of the item given the construction of the advert. James felt he needed, in his words, to put some "realism" into the message:

James: The thing is they know they can watch it on a Saturday morning especially near Christmas and there can be a whole range of toys that they might be interested in. I tend to pour scorn if you like on the way the adverts been set up and I think they've got used to that sort of behaviour from me saying it doesn't really do that, that sort of thing you know. In other words trying to put some realism into what, what they are going to get if they buy it and not just what's on the advert.

Several parents spoke of the pressure particularly at Christmas to provide children with the 'in' toy and the desperate measures that many parents went to, to ensure children had the toy that they wanted. Parents in the pilot study talked of investing additional time and energy in sourcing scarce toys as well as paying increased prices to ensure their child had what they wanted on Christmas morning. This was a theme that continued throughout the main study and this parent from West Street talked about her desperation in trying to track down a Furby last year:

Jill: No I phoned made numerous phone calls used to go in every Saturday (laughs) I can't believe I did it. I did it for them because they you know um but yeah I used to go in first thing on a Saturday morning to see if any shops had them. Her grandmother was doing the same as well I mean we were in London not purposefully for that but we actually went in to one of the big toy shops to try and find it yeah so.

J: What was that kind of sort of big need in you to do that?

Jill: I just had to in the end I had to get it for her you know um you just had to do it because she'd asked for that specifically for

Christmas and I suppose that I thought I've just got to do that if that's the only thing she wants for Christmas. I've got to get it a bit thing really I mean it's with these Tamagotchi's as well we did the queuing up for that as well you know it's really quite sad really when you look back and think I did that you know.

J: Why do you think um why do you think parents do that then?

Jill: Well because the children they just so desperately want it and that's the only thing they want and it's not really when you look into it and you maybe talk to them... not the only thing they want but a they make it out you know that they want that. All their friends have got it and you think well why shouldn't mine have it I suppose.

Parenting, gender roles and consumption

Parents' roles in both groups within the physical process of 'doing' consumption were stereotypically gendered; man adopting the role of provider and woman as that of consumer. Even where parents were living in separate households the majority of mothers were still co-ordinating the present list. Mothers were giving lists to fathers to ensure the right items were being bought. Mothers generally cast fathers in the role of not capable of buying the right things or of wasting money. Many mothers felt that they themselves were better placed to know what the children wanted. What was also interesting on the last point was that where there was a mother and father living together it was the mother that did most of the organising and buying of material goods. Yet if the father became the lone parent the situation changed considerably. Therefore, the notion that the father was incapable of fulfilling the traditional female role of organiser, shopper and co-ordinator collapsed. Where the father had become the lone parent he had taken on all the roles that women were occupying in terms of organising Christmas presents, planning ahead to maximise money and buying at sale times when toys and games accrued favourable discounts. Some parents did say that the roles were fairly equal and that partners were "pretty good" but it was still the

mother that organised and co-ordinated the bulk of the present buying. Men also picked up the label of expert particularly in relation to technological toys. Mothers said that the father knew more about it and generally there was a general apathy towards women themselves wanting to engage with or understand this type of childrens entertainment. For example this parent from West Street said:

Jenny: But he is inclined to buy the things that I suppose especially things like electronic games perhaps they've shown him or he's had more interest in...and I've not really been very interested in.

The following two quotations were where the father was cast as either not knowing what to get or wasting money on something inappropriate. Bev from the Greenfield area says:

No he don't know, he might sort of like we might go in town like Jess's birthday's coming up now I mean my eldest one's just turned 16. I mean it was a case of me going in town buying he just hasn't got a clue...I think because this is going to sound awful because there's 2 girls he just hasn't got a clue he just does not know so if he'll go in town and I'm like sort of with him he might say well do you think Imogen would like that and all? Well no not really. But he has on the odd occasion gone in and bought things I mean he's the expert on the Playstation games he's the one that does that I haven't got a clue on them right [laughs].

Sally from West Street made similar remarks about her partner's ability to buy the 'right' things, this particular aspect of gender roles appeared to cut across both social class groups:

Sally: Yeah, I do everything at Christmas he'll come in with me but I know what I'm going in to get which he's quite happy about really. (laughs)

J: Are you happy about that?

Sally: I don't mind yeah he'd probably come home with something totally useless.

Parents perceptions of the gendered nature of children's material possessions

In Chapter 6 it could be seen from the children's responses that they often had very fixed constructs about what girls and boys liked. Deviating from those norms in the minds of the children brought comment and sometimes ridicule between children and their peers. Parents were asked if they considered there to be any differences for children in terms of consumption patterns and gender. The responses were slightly surprising in that, even parents who were clearly aware of gender issues had fairly firm beliefs about the differences that existed between boys and girls. It seemed that there was a cultural barrier operating that parents were conforming to (See Messner, 2000). Some related this point back to direct experience from differences amongst their own children whilst others also felt that advertising messages set up clearly defined parameters for children (and adults ultimately) to work within. For example this parent from West Street made the following comment:

June: Yes boys don't like books.

J: They don't?

June: Not generally no. I think boys are actually worse than girls for wanting up to the minute latest toys, technology things much more so than girls.

J: Why do you think that is, where do you think they pick that up from?

June: I think some of it is that the market's actually aimed at boys you know a lot of the technological toys are aimed at boys as opposed to girls...so I suppose obviously they pick up on it quicker. I think it's 'cos boys need more amusing than girls more entertaining I think girls would cope better (laughs) without outside help.

This parent from the East Street area made very generalised stereotypical comments about boys and girls preferences:

Lisa: Obviously girls are not so much in to these computer games I don't think anyhow you know she likes watching a video and whatever. But you know obviously when it comes to clothes and things like that when she gets a little bit older she's going to want it 'cos you know girls take more of a pride in themselves than boys.

Even toys that could be seen to be gender neutral such as Beanie Babies have been constructed in the minds of the parents in terms of 'boy type Beanies.'

Lisa: It was easier to buy for Kerrie because she likes clothes and there are more girls things around really. I think there's Barbie you know Cindy and that of thing and Beanies I mean. William has got a couple of Beanies he's got like little black dogs and you know boy type Beanies but there is a lot more for girls than there is for boys. although possibly I've restricted myself because I won't buy aggressive things so wouldn't buy Power Rangers and I wouldn't buy I mean he has got Action Men he has got a few Action Men but I've never ever bought guns we've had no guns in this house...so maybe I've restricted myself.

Within the gender discourse another strong theme that emerged from discussions with the parents was the notion that girls would be happy to sit and amuse themselves where as boys needed to be amused. Girls were also seen by parents to be more engaged with activities such as listening to CDs or making things. In terms of computer use girls used them either to design things or support school work but rarely if ever did a parent mention girls playing games on the computer in the same way that it was expected that boys would. As we saw in the children's responses, parents too realise that girls are disaffected from technological games.

Stephanie: He will either be out playing football or he'll sit on that Playstation or he'll watch TV but if he's been in trouble and can't watch the TV or do the Playstation he will ask to play a board game with me. Jessica will sit and amuse herself playing with her Barbie's or cutting out or something but he once the TV or the Playstations gone he says he's bored.

Gina: Yeah but she's very girly I mean Pokemon the first that they've really had very much in common and she's very much Barbie and girly things. She could spend hours just sat in her room

fiddling with doll's clothes and writing and reading and doing those kind of things that he would never do.

In terms of gender roles a final interesting theme emerged whereby fathers were seen as the technological experts. Fathers were also occupying their leisure time through play either on their own or with the children. This play was focused around particularly games consoles:

Lisa: I mean the Playstation he wanted it as much as Alex did so that one was never an argument. He works away a lot so anything that encourages him to spend time with them when he is here you know that's great because he won't get on the floor and play Monopoly or Jenga or where as I do that day in and day out but he'll play Playstation.

Stephanie: No, no 'cos Adrian (the stepfather) plays that (the Playstation) so it'd be down here and I wouldn't get two one's enough.

This family seemed to be going one step further by buying specific toys for the father's entertainment:

Bev: 'Cos I mean even at his age we bought him a couple yeah...he's a big baby um we buy him things if he had a boy he would buy himself like we bought him like a 4x4 remote control car and he's even got toys.

There seems for men, a legitimisation in being allowed to 'play' albeit this is often done vicariously through the children. It is allowable it seems for fathers to be seen to play but there was no evidence of mothers 'playing.' Whether there would have been different responses if more men were interviewed or whether there is a definite gender gap in this issue is something that needs further exploration. But as with many of these themes there was enough of a focus for it to warrant discussion and raise further questions about the ideology of gender, play and childhood.

Concluding comments

The debate surrounding children and their relationship to the world of consumption is much more complex than many media reports credit. The dearth of literature surrounding family relationships and consumption weakens our understanding of children as consumers and this research has tried to take steps to try and fill part of that gap within the sociology of consumption literature. There is indeed a series of negotiations that socialise children into their consumption choices (Roedder John, 1999; Gunter and Furnham, 1998). Within those negotiations there are many participants with the most prominent being the children themselves, their parents, their peers and advertisers. What this research has tried to do is to look at the process from the perspective of children and parents. The parents link is primarily that of purchaser for, or on behalf of children. This research has tried to identify what occurs between children and adults and in particular to tap into the negotiating mechanisms that come into play within families. In several families in the East Street area, and to a lesser degree in the West Street area, both the children and the consumption process appeared to be used to strike at the heart of unresolved issues and resentments between the parents. That is not to say however, that if we delved more deeply it would not be the same in the West Street area. Parents may just have been more adept at concealing this aspect of family dynamics. Children did demonstrate that they were picking messages up from these family dynamics. That issue alone is something that needs specific and more in-depth discussion. There was, however, a strong enough theme to realise, that as was stated earlier, the dynamics and the negotiating mechanisms are much more complex than the superficial comments that many political and social commentators make when discussing family values and children's lives in society today (Moore, 2001; Rice, 2000). What this research has shown is that

there is indeed a much higher level of negotiation going on than had first been envisaged. It could be seen from the responses to the research questions posed that parents face very difficult decisions in trying to steer a path through the consumer based society in which we live. To give into children because of peer pressure is a decision that parents appear to feel very uncomfortable about making. Yet to deny their children signifiers of peer inclusion is to risk their child being marginalised and for the majority of parents in this study that was a risk that was ultimately too great to take.

Parents from all groups gave evidence at some point of going along with fads and crazes even when they had not wanted to. Social class background was not of significance in terms of what parents would or wouldn't buy. All these consumer cycles parents felt were ultimately part of childhood culture. Many parents suggested that there always had been the 'fad' toy even twenty or thirty years ago, although there did appear to be more of them and certainly a lot more pressure to buy them now. Irrespective of attitudes, beliefs and social class differences, the purchase of games consoles, personal television sets, Pokemon cards, Furbies and Beanie Babies cut across all classes. There are however clear differences in social class terms if we step back and look at the bigger picture. From Bourdieu's (1984) perspective many of the possessions children aspire to may not have a great deal of cultural capital attached to them but they certainly could be seen as providing symbolic and social capital. The overwhelming majority of parents agreed they had at some point given in to peer power on the grounds of ensuring their child did not have to experience feelings of marginalisation. Parents that are particularly averse to following trends all gave examples of giving in once they could see that the child was not going to give up

on the request. Equally parents who initially say no not because of social or political reasons but because of financial reasons ultimately relent because they strive to buy the product at all cost. Their reasons for bowing to children's pestering are often portrayed in the media in a negative way but parents in this research genuinely wanted their children to have the best chances of social and educational success. It appears that parents realise in order to do this children need a currency to trade with in their academic and social lives. That currency it could be argued for children has become material possessions and consumer goods.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This research set out to identify and begin to fill a gap that exists within the sociology of consumption literature namely: childrens understanding of and relationship to consumer culture. Because of the age of the children involved in the research there was also a need to look at the dynamics and relationships that exist between children, their parents and the world of consumption. The primary research questions that needed addressing were as follows: do children from social class backgrounds use consumer goods in different ways? What meaning do children attach to material possessions and what are the social and cultural aspects of childrens relationships with consumption? How do families with differing levels of household income manage the increasing demands to supply children with the signifiers of popular culture that they apparently aspire to? In this thesis I have attempted to put class and material inequalities on the sociology of consumption agenda.

I suggested in Chapter 2 that both the class literature and the identities literature raised questions that needed to be addressed empirically in relation to questions of inequality and social exclusion in contemporary society. This thesis has tried to bridge those two substantive issues by making links between social inequality, class and issues of identity. I would argue that this research has aimed to offer a more holistic response to the complexities of the wider social relationships of the world of the young consumer.

This research has above all addressed the following issues: it has placed children front and centre of the consumption agenda, it has also added to that agenda by identifying

the familial dynamics that surround everyday acts of consumption. As I suggested in Chapter 3 levels of inequality have widened over the last three decades and with the niche marketing associated with many goods specifically aimed at children this has complicated our understanding of children and families relationships to consumer culture. Changing family structures combined with a shift in to a more consumer based society have arguably all resulted in changing times for many children (Prout, 2000a). Buckingham (2000) argues that the growing divide between the rich and the poor means many children are unable to participate in anything other than the most basic forms of consumer culture. The evidence from this research reinforces the contention made by authors such as Kempson *et al.* (1994) that families are prioritising children's consumer needs over other household expenses to ensure that their children can accumulate the accoutrements of modern day living.

Using creative methods helped me to gain a multi dimensional response to the differing roles that consumption occupies in children's lives. Jenks (2000) it seems is right to suggest that ethnography is an effective methodology to be employed in the study of childhood as children are enabled to engage and be engaged. Having to think carefully about the many facets of undertaking research with a population of young children did mean that I had to be continually reflexive about both my role as the researcher and my research questions which I believe ultimately enriched the quality of the data generated.

Consumer goods are central to children's lives and for most children living in western society their entry into the world is often heralded by consumer goods from their parents and extended family and friends. As the literature illustrates most people's relative standard of living has improved during the post war period (Lunt and

Livingstone 1992; Bocoock 1993). Many of the changes have resulted in a diversification of both family structures and family life. Children, because of the changing nature of family life (Buckingham, 2000) and because they are targeted as a distinct segment of the market in their own right now it could be argued have a different relationship to the world of consumption than their parents did a generation ago. Therefore, it is unsurprising to see the central role consumer goods have come to play in young children's lives. The children in this study enlightened this area of the consumption research agenda considerably by detailing their relationship to contemporary consumer culture. The strongest themes that emerged were issues around social class, peer pressure, gender, money and the use of their leisure time. Looking at those themes individually I now want to compare and contrast my data with the existing literature in this area.

Social Class and Consumption

Class and the access to resources are central to any meaningful discussion about an individual's ability to participate fully in the society in which they live. As Belk (1999) suggests there is a need to be able to understand the 'have nots' in a world of 'haves' as the gap between the richest and the poorest families in Britain continues to widen (Gregg *et al.* 1998; Bauman 1998; Jenkins 1994). This study offered a snapshot of some of the inequalities that exist within and around contemporary consumer culture. If we reflect back on Bauman's (1998) work which was discussed in Chapter 3 there was evidence of parents wanting their children to be included in what passed for a 'normal' life. Bauman argues that a fifth of British children live in poverty; twice as many as in Taiwan or Italy and six times as many as in Finland. Under the Thatcherite Government of the eighties the proportion of poor people increased by

nearly sixty percent (Bauman 1998). Link that to the unrelenting growth of new consumer markets including those for children and we can see why Bauman is right to suggest that “the subjective sense of insufficiency...is aggravated by a double pressure of decreasing living standards and increasing relative (comparative) deprivation” (p.41). Consumer culture, Bauman argues, alleviates the boredom and the non-existence that goes hand-in-hand with poverty and for many parents in this study it seems they were doing as much as they could to ensure their children did not have to experience that non-existence at first hand.

Social class background did affect children’s relationships to consumer culture but those relationships were not particularly clear cut. There is indeed an argument to suggest that there is a point where social class collapses amongst children’s relationship to the world of consumption because many of the consumer goods appeared in all groups irrespective of social class background. This last point, it could be argued, is because of the positioning, age grading and marketing of those goods to this age group of children. Generally there was very little variation on the types of items owned across different socio-economic groups. Where social class positioning became significant and where more affluent families were using their class position to separate their children from other children was in children’s leisure activities and the amount of clubs and societies that children belonged to. The range of leisure pursuits listed in their diaries was significantly higher amongst the children in the West Street area. It was clear from this study that even from this young age children’s experiences of a notion of childhood were extremely class specific. Their habitus, to use Bourdieu’s (1990) terminology, was being constructed within an educational discourse and around activities that are likely to increase their levels of cultural

capital in later life. Evidence of this was apparent from the children themselves when they talked of being 'rich' but this may take the form of other mediums rather than money; the example Tia used was of winning races and acquiring gold medals. Those foundations were firmly inculcated in both children's expectations and their perspective on their future lives. If we reflect on Jenkins (1992) notion of a field then it could be argued that both families and children's peer groups were the 'fields' that were mediating children's relationships to consumer culture. The 'struggles' that parents faced in resisting children's demands were evidenced by the powerful force of the 'field' of the pressure of children's peer group. As Bourdieu (1991) argues the field is the crucial mediating context wherein external factors affect individual practice (quoted in Jenkins 1992:86). For many of these families it was the structural pressure of perceived isolation from their peers that children would have experienced that made parents buy items they were against in principle.

Conversely in the East Street area children were commonly experiencing a childhood where their leisure time was constructed around a fairly narrow range of activities that were generally linked to the street areas near to their homes. Unlike the children in West Street they were very aware that money was something of a sporadic resource and that many demands were placed on often a fairly small pool from which they draw. Again there was evidence of children's use and understanding of money being very much about immediacy and the children seemed to be enjoying the money whilst they had it because it may not appear again for a while. This was also a theme that children in this area also related to extended family members and grandparents. It seemed therefore that this was a pattern had been learnt rather than just a localised difficulty being faced within a family at this particular time. Reflecting back on

research notes taken at the time and the themes that evolved from the interviews with both the adults and the children the impression surrounding money in the East Street area was one of anxiety and having to keep looking ahead in order to meet targets.

If we consider children's experiences of the availability and use of money in the home, pocket money and making purchases from shops as a primary form of economic socialisation (Gunter and Furnham 1998) then the experiences of the two groups of children in this study were vastly different. The whole ethos of money, availability and its use as a motivator for academic success was disproportionately placed in favour of better off children. This very much ties in to Shropshire and Middleton's (1999) notion that children living in poorer families are learning about and experiencing the economic world differently from their peers and lowering their aspirations for their own futures. These respondents were in summary 'learning to be poor'. The wider implications of these early messages that children pick up on is that children in lone parent families and families who are reliant on income support are aware of their families lack of resources and as such learn that they cannot have everything they want (Shropshire and Middleton, 1999). The authors also suggest that by children learning to lower their aspirations in economic terms this may also account for why children in lone parent and income support families enter jobs that require lower academic qualifications. If this is the case then this clearly has implications for young people's long-term financial positioning through their relationship to the labour market.

In Chapter 3 it was suggested that Bourdieu's framework of looking at different types of capital would be a useful basis with which to look at the class differences between

the two areas. Parents were investing heavily in consumer goods and going to inordinate lengths to ensure that they could provide children with the items they requested. Many parents lacked what could be seen as forms of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). It appears, however, that consumer goods offer parents the means to endow their children with both social and symbolic forms of capital that ultimately ensured their children were not excluded from their peer groups. Realising that education is the means of securing the future and of obtaining a good job many parents vociferously justified the need to be able to provide children with certain possessions (particularly IT resources) that would supplement their formal education. The importance of education cut across all social classes but clearly parents in the West Street area had the means to enable their children to partake in a wide range of sporting, musical and leisure activities. Having the resources to participate in a wider curriculum of activities could be seen as enhancing and supporting both their children's education at this time and would also offer them a wider social space which is likely to also offer them skills in later life. Children in the less well off families were being denied access to economic capital, which restricted their access and inclusion to other extra curricular activities. It could be argued that this lack of opportunity in their formative years may also deny them access to cultural capital in later years. Parents' investment in material possessions seemed to offer their children both symbolic and then social capital amongst their peers. This could be seen to be justified on the basis of being able to provide them with what they wanted and was also bound up with issues of good parenting. It is also worth at this point reflecting back on Smith's (2000) argument in Chapter 4 that those on the margins of society often find their sense of inadequacy easily awakened especially if they are not able to participate fully in all areas of social life. Ultimately the marginalised seek

recognition and acceptance as well as legitimation by being equal members of the consumer society (Smith 2000).

With the parents there were some differences in the rhetoric used about particular types of goods across different groups but the vast majority of parents all said they had bought things that they didn't really agree with in principle at various points. It is also worth noting that parents often changed their minds about not allowing children to have particular items because of the efficacy of their children's pestering skills over a period of time. There was clear evidence of parents objecting to certain material possessions because they were seen to be generally lacking in educational value or were simply deemed a waste of money. However, at some point, even if parents were against buying a particular item they all at some point, relented and bought the item.

Children themselves did not appear to be using material goods as a means of differentiating themselves from other children in the way that Veblen (1899/1953) might have us believe. In fact, children wanted similar things to their friends rather than different things because they wanted to be included and inclusion meant having the appropriate signifiers of contemporary consumer culture. On the other hand parents were trying to differentiate their children on the basis of what they would or would not buy for them and many of these examples were both classed and gendered. There was evidence in homes in both areas of what may be considered as vicarious consumption whereby parents were bestowing certain items onto children that in some cases the child did not even want. The parents thought that children should have certain items to prevent them from being left behind in relation to their peers. There was also a fine line between what might have been seen as ostentatious consumption

or notions of demonstrating that you could provide particular goods as a sign of good parenting. As well as examples of what could be seen as evidence of Simmel's (1904) 'trickle down' theory of fashion there was also clear examples in both groups of children of what could be seen as 'trickle-up' (McCracken 1990) whereby children in more affluent families were wanting to imitate fashion within the less affluent families. As I suggested in Chapter 2 an individual's access to resources is central to any meaningful discussion when trying to understand the links between social class and consumption. Understanding the links between class, consumption and family dynamics may also add to our insight into the relationship between consumption and identity and I want to discuss those links more fully in the next section.

The meanings of material possessions

The two groups of children were using consumer goods in different ways to express aspects of their identity. Role models and fashion were fairly universal across age, gender and class groups but the means to be able to buy into particular identities were clearly class specific. The data would also suggest that the range of identities and possibilities for constructing identities appeared to be much greater for children living in more affluent families. This arguably reflected the range of activities and experiences they were exposed to on a regular basis compared to children of the same age living in less well-off families. What was demonstrated in the data was the process by which children apparently used material possessions to express aspects of their identities and what they 'read' from both popular icons in the media and their peers in terms of what they were wearing or what items they wanted to own. Certainly for the Year 6 children they were as Erikson (1963) might have suggested searching for ways to create their identity in relation to other individuals and groups around

them. In Chapter 2 I mentioned the difficulties inherent in trying to define and operationalise a concept of identity. However, identifying the meanings that children attached to material possessions and how they chose to express aspects of their identities through consumer goods did offer some clues as to how they were negotiating and interpreting the identity-enhancing features of many of their material possessions. A lot of the children were certainly looking at aspects of identity through role models such as Britney Spears, S Club 7 and various television characters. There were aspects of popstars and television actor's identities that children wanted to align with and which were often focused around consumer goods. Whether by focusing on other people's identities meant children adopted such an identity would need further research. Material possessions played a central role in how children wanted to be 'seen' by others and as such Dittmar's following contention is extremely accurate,

"Identity is established, maintained, reproduced and transformed in relations with our material possessions...individuals can gain a view of themselves through the symbolic meanings of possessions...[as well as] the identity of other people becomes visible in objectified form too..." (1992:86/87)

Culturally consumer goods did seem to be communicating to children what sorts of identities they could express (du Gay 1997) and this was particularly noticeable when listening to children talking about the types of clothes that popstars, footballers and television personalities were wearing. Dittmar (1992) argues that material possessions have both identity-creating and identity-enhancing features because of their communicative properties and if people doubt aspects of their identity then more emphasis will be placed on 'appropriate' material symbols. Within this study the identity-enhancing properties of consumer goods cross-cut both age groups and social class groups. I would argue that consumer goods have become so central to children's

lives because they can be seen to be a currency with which they can both trade and communicate in their wider social networks. Consumer goods may also offer the means to express elements of their personalities that may otherwise remain hidden. The symbolic significance of possessions is in their relationship to our sense of identity and to the identity of others (Dittmar, 1992:66). This symbolic significance is innermost to many children's sense of security and will be demonstrated in the next section.

Consumer goods as a form of security in times of change

The pressures that were being articulated by children in the East Street area surrounded their imminent transition to secondary schooling but were not related to academic success or failure. Both boys and girls were seeking solace in the knowledge that their parents would buy them particular items of clothing for the start of their new school term. Educational success did not seem to be so embedded in the minds of the children or rewarded in the way that it was at West Street School. That is not to say that parents did not reflect on this aspect of their children's lives. They were well aware of the pressures that children were under to secure qualifications to enable them to be part of a future labour market. Future success in the labour market was perceived by the parents as placing them under pressure to provide educational items to enhance their learning. What was central to the Year 6 children's agenda at East Street was the need to be reassured that their parents would buy the items that would make them blend-in at their new school. Wanting to fit in and not attract unnecessary attention based on what they were wearing was a high priority for these children. As we saw in the data in Chapters 6 and 7 secondary level schooling was the juncture at which both parents and children recognised that children were not

prepared to have 'any' pair of trainers it must be a branded or a labelled product. Both the parents and the children were explicit in their expectations for the next stage of the life course where their [children's] relationship to consumer culture would be become less flexible.

Peer Pressure

Moschis and Moore (1982) argue that peer influence operates mostly strongly in situations with weak family communication and unstable family environments. In this study there were no significant differences in either area in terms of peer influence. Parents from both areas raised the issue of the perceived increased level of peer pressure that they considered their children to be under today compared to how they felt it had been for them as children. Where there was a noticeable difference was in the explicit culture of ridicule and teasing at East Street School which seemed to heighten the pressure that the children were experiencing in having to own particular symbols of consumer culture. As I have discussed in both Chapters 4 and 6 these are challenging issues for children to be dealing with. Parents themselves found these issues distressing and for many just the thought of their children having to endure stigma or feelings of marginalisation because of the lack of certain clothes, labels or games was too much for them to be able to reconcile. Middleton *et al.* are right when they assert that "a common culture of acquisition exists amongst all children which, must place disproportionately greater demands on the family budgets of lower income households" (1994:24). This suggests that the argument could be proposed that consumer goods have a clearer resonance with status in poorer areas which was why, to avoid the ridicule children were faced with, having the appropriate signifiers of fashion was so important to them. If parents as adults find these issues problematic

with all the awareness and hindsight they have had with their own childhoods, it must be doubly difficult for children themselves to be on the receiving end of such negative behaviour. Lucid examples were given by children in this area relating to themselves and to children that they knew, who were experiencing such ridicule. Having to constantly defend your place in the world and to manage pressures about the types of clothes that you wear or being unable to have the latest in toy or game is another pressure that children may well feel they could do without. Evidence from this research is that peer pressure is having a constraining effect on children's behaviours and activities. Perhaps they will become more fluid as they age but certainly in the short term and as they enter the secondary education phase there was no indication of those pressures lessening.

Gender and Consumption

In terms of gender it seems that children are unable to participate in consumption without adopting a gendered position either through the positioning of goods or the normative behaviours and comments through interaction with their peers. This is not surprising where in many western societies children are immersed into a culture of gendered symbols before they even enter nursery education Messner (2000). I would concur with Messner who argues that we also need to think about how consumer goods may activate gender as an organising principle in children's wider social lives.

For the boys in this research the primary focus of consumption in the last decade has been the expansion of technological games machines. Boys engage with this type of leisure pursuit and it is both appealing and engaging for them to participate in. Toys and consumer goods were both gendered and age graded and there appeared to be

evidence of children entering into arenas that in earlier decades would have traditionally been seen as an adolescent activity or certainly associated with secondary schooling rather than primary school. The strongest example of this with the girls, was the concept of clothes and fashion where what seemed like physically very young girls were aware of body image and how they needed to look to be able to wear particular types of clothes. This was certainly being reinforced by their role models in the media such as Britney Spears, Geri Halliwell and S Club 7. As we saw in Chapter 6 there was a strong theme with the girls whereby, they wanted to be wearing clothes that were either the same as or similar to their female friends. It was important to the girls that they wore clothes that would meet with their friends' approval.

All of the children in this study, irrespective of social class positioning appeared to be extremely media literate. By that I mean they were very heavily engaging with pop icons, soap stars and media images and then using those images to reflect on the type of fashion they wanted to align with. Boys also had willingness and an allegiance to express aspects of their identities through sporting heroes and particular football clubs such as Manchester United. Whilst fashion items were seen to be of importance to the girls, owning the football strip of their favourite team was central to the boys' discussions around fashion and clothing.

Advertising

Whilst there would seem to be a correlation between role models that they admired in the media the children did not overtly talk about television advertising as a means of influence to buy certain products. The parents however, did state quite clearly that Saturday morning television advertising (which is specifically aimed at children) did

impact on their children. Weekend programming and advertising certainly stimulated interest and requests for particular items. Increased television advertising as Christmas approaches was also a factor in generating ideas for particular items. Whilst the children did not acknowledge advertising as a factor in influencing what possessions they aspired to, an interesting event occurred at a morning assembly in West Street School which I was invited to attend whilst working at the school. One of the sketches in their assembly was for a group of children to start the first line of a television advert and then the rest of the School had to guess what it was. Within the first three or four words of the advert being expelled from the children's mouths the rest of the children erupted with the end of the advert. The products were not necessarily even items that you would associate with the children's market. For example, the first product was a leading hair care product aimed at the adult women's market, one was pet food and another was a food group product that had a very catchy lyric which, would be something that perhaps children would engage with. This was a powerful example of just how subtle these messages are and even if they do not directly relate to the children themselves the children are still engaging with the message. This pervasive medium seems to appeal to children and by doing so imputes images and messages about particular products directly to their audience. Whilst there is no clear evidence as to the effects of television advertising on children (Buckingham, 2000; Gunter and Furnham, 1998) it is a medium that appears to work well at engaging children and young people's attention. We do also have to question why would companies invest so heavily in targeted advertising if they do not yield appropriate returns in their sales figures (Curtis, 1999)?

Different childhoods?

In Chapter 4 I talked of the differing discourses offered by journalists and the media on contemporary notions of childhood. One of the themes in that chapter was that many of the consumer shifts such as children's increased engagement with consumer culture and the media was seen as evidence of the death of what was seen to be a traditional 'childhood.' As this thesis draws to a close what we need to reflect on is, the extent to which consumer culture may have driven these changes and subsequently shifted customary ideas of childhood. Alternatively are marketers just responding to children's demands? And what role do parents play in this process?

There is a particularly negative discourse in which, much of the right wing press often blame parents for feeding children's cravings for certain consumer goods and perpetuating the cycle because parents are 'giving-in' which thereby exacerbates the cycle of want Carvel (2000). Rice (2000) suggests that many parents have become cash-rich but time-poor and driven by guilt. They therefore, overcompensate or palliate their anxieties and emotions through material possessions. Perhaps parents do feel the need to compensate for not being able to spend the amount of time they would like with their children and perhaps that overcompensation is routed through consumer goods and leisure pursuits. Parents it seems, whatever their actions are often targeted for all the ills in society (as is consumption per se). We have seen wider political strategies particularly around welfare to work policies, parents, and in particular lone mothers, who have been systematically targeted to (re)-enter the labour market in ever increasing numbers. As a result of these targets out of school child care schemes becomes a significant feature in the lives of many children (Smith and Barker 2000). Childhood is not just about a child's immediate family circumstances it

is part of a much bigger political and social picture all of which needs to be reflected on before making judgements about the quality of children's lives today. This research is not about the 'right' or 'wrong' of family/parenting situations and decision-making processes but has tried to illustrate through evidence the complexities inherent in the debates that many political and social commentaries fail to fully acknowledge.

Parents in this research described how they worked hard to maintain a balance between providing children with the items that they wanted whilst trying to set limits that they felt were appropriate to their individual circumstances. The importance of children realising that they cannot necessarily have everything that they wanted was something that many parents commented on. Most of the parents in both areas were managing the situation rather than simply passively following trends. Parents, it seemed were engaging with and reflecting on their own motivation as well as the stimulus created by advertisers and marketers. Resisting the fads and the crazes, however, results eventually in their child being stigmatised or marginalised on the basis of not being able to join in activities with other children. Whichever way parents view the issue it is a difficult course to steer and an issue that is taken very seriously by parents who appeared to be trying to adopt a rational stance on the whole discourse of children and consumer goods.

Presents appeared to be both significant and central in the children's lives. This was a theme that occurred not only from the discussions between the children but also the planning on parents' behalf to ensure children were not disappointed on Christmas morning. From the children's perspective there was evidence that they were

associating levels of material possessions with parental love. Mel explicitly said this when asked the question why do some children get more things than other children she replied; “because they love ‘em better.”

Perhaps Belk (1995) is right to suggest that gift giving is enveloped within an expression of love and emotional symbolism. Parents were giving to their children unselfishly and without expectations of reciprocity and in some cases going to great lengths to plan ahead and ensure their children could have at least some of the things they had requested for birthdays or Christmas. This effort by parents was in some cases attributed to peer groups, as Jill suggested, “All their friends have got it and you think well why shouldn’t mine have it I suppose.” There was also another issue whereby being able to provide your children with symbols of contemporary popular culture was somehow integral to notions of good parenting.

A very strong theme that emerged from this research was the pace of the change that parents perceived had occurred over the last two to three decades. All of the changes were linked to improved material circumstances, technological shifts and the perception that childhoods were much riskier than they were when the parents themselves were a child. These risks were undoubtedly about sexual danger and the subliminal threat that the world outside the front door was a place where paedophiles lurked on street corners. These findings were very much concomitant to the findings of other studies on contemporary notions of childhood (Scott *et al.* 1999, Hockey and James, 1993). A dilemma that arose on this issue was the perception of the adults did not appear to concur with children’s lived experiences. For example, a large number of the children when completing their diaries spent periods of time outside of the home playing in parks, fields or just hanging around the streets. There did not appear

to be the high levels of adult surveillance on children's activities that might have been expected if we were to take parent's concerns and worries at face value. These anticipated risks, however, were impacting on how parents perceived children could safely fill their leisure time. There was evidence of parents restricting activities outside of the home based on anxieties about safety which were also related to the age of the child. A tacit acceptance by parents that children now had to entertain themselves in different ways because of those risks was firmly inculcated in the mindset of many of the parents as Thomas (1927) concludes "if people define situations as real they are real in their consequences" (p.27).

The idea that childhood has changed was of significance within the mind's of the parents' in this research. A big part of that change was linked to the increase of consumption and consumer goods in children's lives. The types of toys and games available were seen to be vastly different to how parents themselves had perceived it had been in their own childhoods. Parents saw the technological advances in children's toys and games as a major factor for the increased costs in those items. There was a general feeling that children today were less content to partake in traditional childhood games and pursuits because the pace of life had changed. Juxtaposed to this was the sheer number of items available and targeted at entertaining and amusing children. A highly significant finding was that in the majority of the parents, they felt that children were under a lot more pressure both commercially and amongst their peers now than they themselves had experienced as children. This was a strong factor in parents often giving in to repeated requests for products that they considered to be a waste of money. Children equally knew that their parents did not want them to feel left out and they often used this as a bargaining

ploy when trying to persuade parents to change their minds. The advertisers seem to have finely tuned their marketing and are well aware of the tactics they need to deploy to position and sell their products within familial discourses. Perhaps, within the arena of consumption the argument could be that children have become, as Ariés (1962) once suggested, only different to adults in relation to their size. It may also be that new forms of consumption targeted at children have created the social shifts that have occurred in the idea that children are ‘getting older younger’ and that their tastes and fashions are now reminiscent of what would have traditionally been seen in older children. This last point is often wrapped up within a discourse of the ‘death of childhood’ in the right wing press (See Moore, 2001). A future point of discussion may be to suspend these mythological and generally romanticised images of childhood and to consider the way in which material possessions and consumer goods have become so central in children’s lives. The suggestion here is that consumption has driven many of the changes which has ultimately resulted in a notion of changing childhoods. Those changes have arisen because consumption has become a medium whereby children can engage with and express aspects of their identity in ways that perhaps they are unable to do in other areas of their life, for example through education or their family.

Future agendas

This research has tried to offer a flavour of what it means to be a child living within a particular locality but operating within the wider structures of a consumer based society. This is a particularist view of childhood rather than a universal perspective and as such there is a need to be cautious in locating aspects of this work as evidence for all children or for all childhoods. However, as Williams (2002) suggests perhaps

we can make 'moderatum' generalisations particularly where there is both shared meanings and the necessary cultural consistency for social actors to go about their daily lives. To enable us to make any broader claims to knowledge there would be a need to extend the study to incorporate larger numbers of children. There would also be a need to consider longitudinal implications of their consumer careers principally because of the changing nature of childhood and children's developing cognition of themselves and the wider social world within which they interact.

Future research may wish to focus more specifically on the minutiae of both group dynamics involved between adults and children and family dynamics within the home as well as perhaps at the point of purchase of particular consumer goods. Interviewing all the members of a family proved fruitful because of the way in which they all had differing views on a particular issue. All of the family members were individually trying to deal with the issues from a different angle yet collectively they were all thrashing out their concerns in different ways. This is just one example amongst several where the effects of consumption are pervasive and experienced on a regular basis, which in turn has an effect on familial relationships and have to be reflected on and reconciled at both the micro and the macro level.

An ethnography of children's play activities either at home or in the school playground could also be an option for future research. Using this method could both neutralise the power dynamics and to observe children in their own worlds. This would be beneficial because it may offer a way of engaging with children in their time and on their terms rather than in the adult world of the formal school setting, which is often constructed around an adultist agenda. Though there may well be ethical and

methodological implications in using this type of method, it may have offered a different dimension to children's relationship to consumer culture. Focusing more closely on how children interact with each other through their discussion of and use of material possessions in their own spaces and their own time may well be a future avenue worth exploration.

Concluding comments

This research set out to offer children a forum to be both visible and vocal within a research setting and by doing that it was possible to gain a fuller understanding of children's relationship to consumer culture. We now know what the children in this study think and feel about the role and importance of material possessions in their lives. This research has also opened up for discussion the complexities of the relationships between children, consumption and families. By focusing specifically on the 'inequalities' of consumption this study has also identified the difficulties that many children experience first hand at not being able to own certain signifiers of popular culture. Equally the pressure that many parents are faced with if their child is marginalised because they do not have the right clothing, footwear or 'in-toy' is palpable in terms of the lengths they went to, to ensure their children did not have to directly experience that marginalisation.

Children are not a homogenous group and the term child or childhood has many different meanings. As we have seen from the children in this study children's everyday lives can range from having very sparse and limited resources through to homes where material wealth and disposable income is very high. Increased inequalities over recent decades has resulted in the amplification of what it means to

be a full citizen in contemporary western society; the passport to that society it could be argued is having the resources to consume. As Prout (2000b) points out “children’s ability to join in contemporary consumption patterns has a crucial importance for their identity and their social relations with other children” (p.308). We also need to add a caveat to Prout’s comments by suggesting that there needs to be a way of both understanding and trying to address the different ways in which inequality impacts on both consumption and children’s identity. What this research has tried to address is children’s qualitative experiences of living in a society that is materially divided. It has also attempted to provide ‘consuming children’ a forum within which they could tell a researcher what role consumer goods occupy in their lives and what it means to them to be able to participate fully or otherwise in a consumer based society.

If childhood is a part of the foundation of our adult experiences and the society to come, sociologists would do well to take heed and listen to those experiences. In order to understand why social divisions and tensions exist today it may be worth pondering on how, as adults, our experiences of the stage of the lifecourse known as childhood and our understandings of a society organised around the principles of consumption have shaped our thoughts and understandings as adults of the social world in which we live.

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