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“Family, Gender, and Socialization” by David Kiron and Seymour Bellin

With the rise in consumption levels following World War II, social relations—within the family, between genders, and among friends—have undergone enormous changes. Similarly, the development of markets aimed exclusively at children’s interests has dramatically influenced the socialization of youth. Increasing consumption traditionally is welcomed as a sign of progress, but many of the accompanying changes have raised concerns about their impact on family, gender, and children. This part analyzes these effects and the influences of cultural trends and institutional forces such as government, technology, and commercialization. The summaries that follow offer telling evidence that consumer culture disrupts family stability and communities, promotes consumption as a significant arena in which to cultivate personal identity, and undermines certain aspects of child development.

The family, in some form, is a major socializing institution that assures the continuity and stability of any society. However, it is useful to distinguish between a society’s ideal of the family and the diversity of actual family forms, which typically depart from the ideal. The nuclear family has been the prevailing normative ideal even though there has always been considerable departure from this ideal due to circumstances such as death, separation, or divorce. Since World War II, especially after the 1960s, divorce and separation have become much more common, as have never-married one- parent families. In recent years, even same-sex couple marriages and families have received legal recognition in some areas. However, a large majority of people have experienced a nuclear family form at some point in their lives. For purposes of our discussion we will focus on the nuclear family ideal, but take into account the reality of a trend toward an increasing diversity in family forms.

The Industrial Revolution wrought many changes in the family dynamic. With the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, the family changed in many important ways. In the preindustrial economy rural households were relatively self-sufficient as all members produced for their collective needs; but with urbanization and industrialization, households began to buy and consume more final goods from the market. The late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the male breadwinner/female homemaker family, as men increasingly worked in industry, while domestic labor was often trivialized and left to women. As families acquired more capital, the

distribution of money within the household became a contested matter between husband and wife, a major factor in marital instability that has continued to this day.

A Selective History of the Family

The first two summaries illustrate two consumption domains that influenced family stability and identity in the United States: domestic money transfers at the turn of the century and the mass introduction of television within the family context during the 1950s. Viviana Zelizer argues that between 1880 and 1930, monetary negotiations within the breadwinner/ homemaker family were a source of conflict in every social class. In general, married men exercised control over family income, including the earnings of their wives and children. The mainstream method of domestic disbursements evolved during this period: At first, the husband allotted money as a gift or upon request and then according to an allowance schedule. Neither approach proved satisfactory, as the female homemaker continued to be a cashless household manager. It was not until the 1930s, when an egalitarian ideal of marriage began to take hold, that the idea of a joint account became an accepted means of allocating domestic monies. The breadwinner/homemaker family structure was deeply fractured by the onset of World War II, when many married and employed men went to war.

The period following World War II was marked by a series of events and government policies that have brought about significant changes in the family and mass consumption. Postwar government policy was predicated on two objectives. The first was to prevent mass unemployment following the demobilization of the large, conscript military forces that fought in the war. Those who served in the defense of the nation, it was believed, deserved to have the opportunity to return to the jobs they held at the time they enlisted or were called to service.¹ One route to this goal was to encourage women to leave industry, a policy consistent with the practices of many companies in industry and business. The exodus of women from industry not only solved the concern about massive unemployment but also restored traditional gendered family roles: the man as breadwinner and the woman as full-time housekeeper.

The second objective of postwar government economic policy was to promote suburbanization and single-family ownership. Toward this end, tax deductions were offered to home buyers; the government financed extensive highway construction, assuring convenient access from the suburbs to workplaces in the central city; and the Federal Housing Administration provided low-interest loans and mortgages.²

The years immediately following the War were unusual because of the disruptive influences of the War itself—delayed marriages, disrupted careers, and subsequent geographic mobility that separated extended families and uprooted people from their neighborhoods. Marriage rates reached a historical peak as did divorces and separations. By the early 1950s, however, there was a drop and leveling off in these rates, although divorce rates continued to rise. Despite the evidence of widespread marital distress, the decade of the 1950s continues to be viewed nostalgically as the “Golden Era” of the family: nuclear in form, stable, cohesive, and content. Commercial television and family situation comedies (sitcoms) played an important role in reinforcing and validating normative ideals about the family during this period. In her article,

Mary Beth Haralovich explores the idealization of the suburban family in an analysis of *Father Knows Bert* and *Leave It To Beaver*, two popular family sitcoms of the 1950s, which seemed to represent model families. The joys of suburban living were exalted, while its familiar troubles were solved from show to show. The gendered space of the home was vividly portrayed; for example, husbands but not wives had private areas. Haralovich dramatizes the institutional forces that influenced the social construction of the homemaker role in suburban lifestyles. Consumer goods industries attempted to sell the female homemaker innovative, time-saving products as well as the idea of effortless home management. This sales pitch consolidated the images of good wife and good mother in the image of a good shopper and efficient household manager.

Televised images of family stability were important since families were moving much more frequently in the decade that followed the end of World War II. As businesses around the country expanded, one in five families moved annually and were uprooted from extended family, friends, and neighbors, important sources of information and advice (as well as social support). As a result, people faced an increasing need for information and advice on matters ranging from new household technologies and products to over-the-counter medications. Women, as the principal family consumer, turned to television and magazines for advice on personal and family matters.

In the 1950s, television was relatively new to the mass market. For the first time, families could see themselves, or what they wanted to see of themselves, reflected on the tube. Between 1950 and 1959, the percentage of households with at least one television exploded from 9 to 90 percent.³ With its widespread appeal, the influence of commercial television extended far beyond its validation of certain family lifestyles. It transformed the use of time within the family dynamic, changing the dynamic of family life. For instance, as family viewing time rose from an average of four hours a day in the 1950s to an average of seven hours in the late 1980s, extended family dinners, which afford time for sociability and conversation, became less common. With the evolution of individualized frozen meals, many families stopped sharing a common meal. As families watched more television, they went to bed later and slept less. By the late 1980s, three out of four households owned more than one television set, which allowed for more private viewing.

The idea that people are engaging in more private consumption is a growing concern of researchers in various disciplines. Part of the concern stems from the idea that the pursuit of private pleasure has an isolating effect and social isolation is known to be connected with psychological depression. People who are embedded in a social network of family and friends are far less likely than those who are without such a support system to develop clinical depression in response to a major stress such as unemployment or the death of a loved one. Social disconnection both reflects and reinforces cultural trends toward self-interest, individualism, and the erosion of community commitments.

The trend toward more private consumption is described in the next summary by Robert Lane, who contends that television viewing, the modern shopping experience, and a rise in individualized consumption contribute significantly to social isolation, which exaggerates the risk of developing depression. And depression is on the rise. Lane cites evidence that people born after 1945 are ten times more likely to suffer from depression than those born earlier. Lane

recognizes the difficulties in establishing causal relations among consumerism, social isolation, and depression, acknowledging that depression may lead to consumerist behavior just as consumerist behavior may lead to depression.

Lane's article also represents a more recent concern about the role of television in contemporary life.⁴ Although television is discussed in more detail in Part VII, we note here that the controversy over the effects of television has now been extended to the civic domain. In a recent article that was published too late for consideration here, Robert Putnam offers television as a significant factor in the deterioration of civic participation and the quality of communities.⁵ Putnam's work has made television into something of a lightning rod for controversy in the debate over civic vitality in the United States.

Gender and Consumer Culture

We are witnessing a major change in the role of work and consumption in shaping personal identity and meaning in the lives of men and women. Men are no longer constrained to find their identity solely in their work, nor women primarily in the home as wives and mothers. As more women enter the workforce, fewer women become full-time homemakers. Certainly some women continue to construct their identity as mother and wife through shopping and managing family consumption, but for many others consumption plays a larger role in defining aspects of self that are separate from the family context.

The next group of summaries discusses the intersection between cultural and institutional forces such as feminism and commercialization, and gender roles within the context of consumption. They reveal a dynamic interaction among gender stereotypes, the role of work, commodities, influences on the formation of preferences, and expressions of personal identity. Three key points emerge: (1) Stereotypes produced in the cultural arena may be embedded in goods exchanged in the market, permitting the reproduction of power relations that exists outside the marketplace; (2) commercialization contributes to the socialization of children through rituals and gendered toys that focus excessively on change rather than growth; and (3) since the 1950s, consumption has become an esteemed and valued project for both genders.

A. Fuat Firat analyzes the latter point, discerning a trend in which men no longer seek their identity solely in the workplace and look increasingly to consumption as a way of expressing themselves. They also suffer and share some of the same ailments and behaviors commonly associated with women: Men suffer from anorexia nervosa at higher rates, albeit at lower levels than women, and men spend millions of dollars a year on plastic surgery.⁶ Similarly, working women have adopted some of the same consumer responses as men to occupational stress and hazards. They use tobacco, coffee, and alcohol at increasing rates, which has led to more incidences of lung cancer and heart disease. Firat also notes that the development of spheres of life outside of work and home (e.g., recreational, neighborhood, shopping) require both men and women to cultivate various personae, which depend on greater private consumption.

In affluent consumer societies, cultural assumptions about gender are incorporated into a vast array of products. The commodification of gender enables us to "buy into gender just as we buy into style."⁷ Helga Dittmar and Susan Willis approach the consequences of this feature of life

within twentieth-century capitalism in somewhat different ways, although both agree that gender stereotypes are perpetuated through goods, especially among children.

Dittmar offers evidence that men and women attach meanings to their most treasured possessions according to gender differences; men and women describe the importance of certain goods, even the same type of goods, in ways that reflect masculine and feminine attributes, respectively. She presents an interesting theoretical framework for understanding the transmission of gender stereotypes through goods. It states that the greater role of commodity consumption in everyday life has a stronger tendency to reproduce the power hierarchy that inheres in the gender status quo.

Willis emphasizes the impact of socializing children into consumer culture through goods that exaggerate differences between boys and girls. With the declining influence of feminism in the 1980s, rigidly gendered toys, such as He-Man dolls for boys, were reintroduced into the market, forcing a new generation of children to enter unwittingly into a gendered social order. From an early age, boys and girls are kept apart by marketing forces, in the types of toys, the kind of play prescribed by these toys, and even by the store aisles in which the toys are found.

Willis also contends that cultural and religious rituals that have traditionally marked the physical transition from childhood to adulthood have been marginalized with the broad acceptance of commercial birthday parties and action figure toys that link physical development with pleasure, fear, and control. The effect on a child's development and self-perception is significant. Birthday parties, certain toys, and superhero stories promote a magical view of inexplicable change, instead of promoting a sensible understanding of personal growth. Children are denied feedback and guidance about the meaning of the physical and emotional changes each gender experiences in the course of development. Willis points out that commercialism, or capitalism more broadly, offers girls and boys few opportunities to share in a gendering process; instead it relies on stereotyped images that promote separate gender development.

Children and Television

Commercial institutions influence the socialization of children on a number of levels. As storytellers, they entertain in order to produce profit. As producers of the stuff of children's material culture, they determine the badges of cultural participation. And as a significant source of time use by children, television structures daily routines. Some researchers have gone so far as to claim that television is the fifth institution of socialization beside family, peers, religion, and school. Since television consumption lies at the convergence of cultural, political, economic, and technological developments, few intradisciplinary studies have provided a broad view of the role of television and commercialization in children's socialization.⁸

In the final summary, Stephen Kline represents one successful effort to understand the growing intrusion of the marketplace within the context of child development. Kline voices a concern that is at the heart of many critiques of the relationship between consumer culture and children: "The marketplace will never inspire children with high ideals or positive images of the personality, provide stories which help them adjust to life's tribulations or promote play activities that are most helpful to their maturation."⁹ The poignancy of Kline's remark is reinforced by the

observation that commercial television has become one of the foremost storytellers to children in modern society. This is true even though many programs that children watch are not designed specifically for them. For example, only 8 percent of an average child's weekly television viewing occurs during Saturday mornings, when the concentration of children's shows is highest.¹⁰ Still, these programs have the largest impact on children's culture. The characters, plots, toys, snacks, and clothes that the Saturday cartoons display contribute to the everyday conversations and interactions among children.

While the profit orientation of the children's entertainment industry is to be expected from a market economy, its unregulated expansion in the United States, during the 1980s especially, is rather uncommon among other industrialized countries. Although this arrangement is exactly what one might expect from a market democracy, other industrialized countries including Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, and the Canadian Province of Quebec have recognized the negative influence of television advertising on children and banned all of it. In Great Britain, where advertising is allowed but strictly regulated, only 30 percent of the toy market consisted of licensed toys (those tied to television characters) compared to 70 percent in the United States as of 1987. Legislative efforts to end advertising to children in the United States failed during the 1970s, and the few limits that were finally passed in 1974 were repealed in 1984, during the Reagan Administration.

Deregulation of commercial broadcasting to children in the 1980s ignored the fact that children under the age of six do not understand that the intent of television advertising is to sell goods. Many young children do not have the language skills to understand the meaning of disclaimers such as "batteries not included" or "partial assembly required," and have difficulty distinguishing between televised fantasy and real life. Although a great majority of children between the ages of three and seven sometimes watch television with a parent who could discuss or help interpret what is being viewed, few parents are patient enough or have enough time to watch Saturday morning cartoons, when children's advertising is most intense.¹¹

In a different light, legislation in 1996 has taken seriously the potential negative effects on a child from watching violent programming, and has required that manufacturers incorporate into new televisions "V-chips," which would allow parents and guardians to more easily censor violent shows. Since frequent exposure to violence has been shown to exaggerate aggressive tendencies in children of various ages, V-chips may well benefit children who watch the new machines—if the shows are rated sensibly, and if parents use the chips' capabilities consistently, two important uncertainties. In any case only new televisions will be affected; V-chips will have little impact on the present generation of children growing up in chipless households.

Although children's television has great potential as an educational medium, there are few commercial incentives to take advantage of it. As a result, the simplistic moral messages to be found in most shows—good conquers evil—are bound up with commercial messages. For instance, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is both a program whose plots often turn on saving the earth from evil and a marketing venue; there are "turtle" toys, foods, clothes, and movies. Kline develops the argument (one that is echoed by Willis as well) that action figure toys, such as Ninja Turtles, come with instruction, images, and scripts that describe, in detail, how to play with the toys. Such prefabricated play limits a child's imagination and stunts cognitive development.

Marketers take full advantage of children's interest in consuming and the fact that the average child spends 25 to 30 hours a week viewing television. Marketers have identified three distinctive and interconnected children's markets: (1) direct purchases by children with their own money—allowances, cash gifts, and earnings; (2) indirect purchases by parents for their children; and (3) future roles as consumers: children begin to be brand conscious as early as two years of age. Each market represents billions of dollars in potential sales. For instance, in 1992, children between the ages of 4 and 12 spent approximately \$9 billion, while teenagers between 13 and 19 spent \$93 billion.¹² Television advertising to children is focused primarily on a child's need for gratification and is limited in the kinds of goods it promotes. Studies have shown that the most heavily marketed snacks are the least nutritious. Finally, television marketing to children contributes to conflicts between children and their guardians over the appropriateness and desirability of certain goods.

Conclusion

A principal objective of this part is to describe the effects of consumerism on family, gender, and children. This essay reveals that answers to some of the most significant questions—where to live, who to live with, who works, what to own, where to play, how to play, who to play with, where to find meaning—have been transformed within a culture that exalts consumption. Researchers have identified at least five societal factors that have contributed to the rise of consumer culture: government policies, mass marketing of television, the development of consumption as an arena in which to seek and express personal identity, increasing rates of labor participation by women, and an expanded role of marketing to children. The negative effects of consumerism, some have argued, are intrinsic to capitalism. Others have argued that institutional opportunities exist within capitalism to diminish consumerist tendencies and their behavioral consequences.

The negative effects of consumerism include, but are not limited to, those of “too much” consumption. As children become consumers at earlier ages, more of their decisions are determined by commercial interests that exploit their need for gratification. As families become more harried, the appeal of the television as babysitter increases. As boys and girls learn to want through the gendered lens of commercial television, their desires are harnessed rather than developed. It is a worthy accomplishment to achieve greater choice in the domain of consumption, but if this achievement is brought about within a restricted range of marketing venues (more K-Marts, fewer neighborhood stores), valuable losses occur. From a social perspective, narrow consumption is at least as alarming as too much consumption.

Notes

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1. For those who did not have jobs or whose education was interrupted, the G.I. Bill of Rights provided financial support to continue their education and help them realize the American Dream that they helped to preserve.
 2. While these developments contributed greatly to the remarkable surge in consumption that occurred after the recession of 1948, it also had other long-term, less visible social consequences. To secure mortgages, the government worked with the real estate and banking industries to protect the property values in the new suburban residential neighborhoods. This was accomplished by creating zoning regulations, “redlining” areas from which

multi-dwelling and nonresidential buildings would be excluded. The net effect was the creation of homogeneous, white, middle-class communities, consisting primarily of young families. Excluded were ethnic, racial, and working-class families.

3. Robert Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS: Political Science and Politics* (December, 1995), 664—683.

4. See Part VII and also Duane Elgin's article in Part X.

5. Putnam, *ibid.*

6. Gender roles and differences also vary across cultures. For example, in the United States, there is a tendency for women to seek to enlarge their breasts whereas in France, the opposite is true. See Lynn Payer, *Medicine and Culture: Varieties of Treatments in the United States, England, West Germany and France* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), 54.

7. Payer, 54.

8. For other views on the dynamics of children, advertising, and markets, see James McNeal, *Children as Consumers: Insights and Implications* (Lexington and Toronto: DC Heath and Company, 1987); Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993); John G. Meyers, "Advertising and Socialization," in *Research in Marketing—Volume I* (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1978), 169—199. For a more critical perspective, see Michael F. Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur, *Marketing Madness: A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society* (Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1995).

9. Susan Willis, 23.

10. Kline, 350.

11. Although there is literature concerning the effects on children of adult programming and commercials, our research has focused on the effects of children's commercial television. However, this limitation is only part of what is not covered by the following discussion. There exists a massive, often contradictory literature on the effects of children's commercial television, including a long list of concerns that are only partly addressed here. There is even a long list of surveys of research into the effects of children's commercial television, each with different conclusions. We suggest that those interested in pursuing these ideas take a look at the bibliography at the end of Stephen Kline's book, *Out of the Garden*, which is partially summarized here.

12. *Marketing Madness*, *op. cit.*, 21.

13. Aletha C. Huston, Doff Ziilmann, and Jennings Bryant, "Media Influence, Public Policy, and the Family," *Media, Children, and the Family: Social Scientific, Psychodynamic, and Clinical Perspectives* (Hilisdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 23.