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## **The Enterprising Parent A Critical Examination of Parenting, Consumption and Identity**

*This article is a critical analysis of how modern western parental identity, parenting practices and children's gendered identities are shaped by discourses of consumption and psychotherapy, as manifested through "entrepreneurialism." Examining the entrepreneurial discourse surrounding "the perfect child's birthday party," the authors examine how self-improvement, individualism, and consumption inform and constrain parental decision-making and, ultimately, their own and their children's gendered identities. Several ways of resisting the entrepreneurial discourse are suggested with an eye toward shifting our definition of "good citizenship," including good parenting, from consumption to service.*

"The Perfect Outdoor Kids' Party!" shouts the cover of my latest copy of *Child* magazine. Wonderful! I think to myself. Timely advice for my son's upcoming birthday.

I flip to the page indicated in the table of contents. "Fresh Squeezed Fun" is scrawled across a picture of cut lemons. "They'll love every juicy minute!"

Wow, I think. What a telling introduction for a piece on parenting, consumption and identity.

In this piece, we explore how modern western parental identity, parenting practices and children's gendered identities are shaped by discourses of consumption and psychotherapy, as they are manifest in "entrepreneurialism." Entrepreneurialism describes a relatively new form of subjectivity wherein individuals act as "entrepreneurs of themselves, seeking to maximize their 'quality of life' through the artful assembly of a 'life-style' put together through the world of goods" (Miller and Rose, 1990: 25). These "enterprising subjects" (Du Gay, 1996) or "entrepreneurial selves" (Miller and Rose, 1990) are driven to pursue "meaning, responsibility, and a sense of personal achievement in life,

and hence in work” (Miller and Rose, 1995: 454). In other words, the constant consumption of products and technologies by the enterprising self is motivated by the perpetual pursuit of self-improvement.

Entrepreneurial discourse is relevant to this discussion because, as Angela Trethewey noted, it “now shapes the available subject positions for contemporary workers at every level of the organization” (2000). The discourse that had its origins in the workplace has now effectively colonized other aspects of the lifeworld, including intimate family relations. The assumption that “the self” is a continual project, always in need of improvement, and subject to the whims of “experts” is evident across a variety of life experiences. Stay-at-home mothers now use the language of the corporation, describing themselves as “family CEOs” and drafting strategic plans for their families, in order to lend credence to their parenting work (Medved and Kirby, 2005). We even adopt an enterprising approach toward sex when we buy lifestyle magazines that promise to help us “get more sex,” by teaching us “how to boost [our] investment in [our] sex life” or offering us “twenty ways to stop wasting time in the bedroom” (Tyler, 2004). In this essay, we argue that parenting, too, has become colonized by entrepreneurial discourses in ways that constrain our individual and collective abilities to serve our children, our communities and ourselves. Finally, we offer an alternative vision of parenting that draws upon alternative discourses of care and service.

Much of the evidence presented herein takes the form of discursive analysis of the first author’s personal parenting experiences (as a middle-class parent) and our scholarly interpretation of “expert” discourses on parenting.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, we would argue that the first author’s experiences are not unique, as evidenced by the burgeoning industry of parenting experts that speak to parents’ anxieties. Bookshelves, for example, bear such weighty titles as *The Mother of All Parenting Books* (Douglas, 2004), and *Building Moral Intelligence* (Borba, 2001).

Magazine racks are also laden with publications providing parental advice, including *Parents*, *Parenting*, *Child*, *Working Mother*, and of course, just about every mainstream women’s magazine out there, including *Good Housekeeping*, *Family Circle*, and *Woman’s Day*, which often have whole sections devoted to parenting/family/children. And the Internet provides parents with instant access to dozens of experts at the push of a button.

Clearly, the reason that this industry can support so many people is because so many parents are voracious consumers of so-called “expert” advice. In fact, our parenting culture is characterized by consumption in one form or another. For example, there’s material consumption and all its related industries—production, marketing, advertising, distribution, and sales. We consume services to create a rich environment for our families—yard maintenance, housekeepers, nannies and window washers. We consume technology to remain “connected” to our children—the Internet, cell phones, television and transportation. Finally, we consume information to ensure that we are doing

our parenting correctly—books, classes, lectures, and discussion groups.

Not only is our culture steeped in consumption, we have officially adopted it as a sign of good citizenship. When manufacturing jobs were heading overseas in record numbers, we were urged to look for the “Made in America” tag before buying. When faced with an economic downturn, President Bush pushed through a tax rebate so that we might spend our way out of a recession. And again, after 9/11, when Bush was asked what “average American[s could] do besides spend, to help,” Bush answered that they should “go about their business” by “tak[ing] their kids on vacations [and going] to ball games” (Bush, 2001).

We have become so entangled in the consumption rhetoric that we now measure a person’s degree of “success” in primarily economic terms (Folbre, 2001). As a result, we often find ourselves in the losing battle of upscale emulation. Instead of trying to keep up with the Joneses—who live across the street and make roughly the same amount of money as we do—we are now comparing ourselves to the Trumps. Juliet Schor (1998) calls this trend “the new consumerism” (4), and points out that it has “led to a kind of mass ‘overspending’ within the middle class” (20).

Indeed, mounting credit card debt and skyrocketing personal bankruptcy filings signify that consumption, or at the very least, one’s perceived ability to consume, are constitutive of identity. The body has become the signpost for an identity crafted through consumption (Jagger, 2002). “[C]onsumer goods [have become] attractive for their symbolism - for the imagery surrounding them and what this might ‘say’ about the person who buys or uses them.” (49). A Timex and a Rolex both tell time, but only one will elicit the admiration of peers.

The problem is that most Americans “live with high levels of psychological denial about the connection between [their] buying habits and the social statements they make.” (Schor, 1998: 19) Although we’re quick enough to attribute such motives to others, we don’t want to believe our own consumptive choices are motivated by social status. “Most Americans would deny that, by their spending, they are seeking status [...]. They might point out that they don’t want everything in sight, [or] that [their] purchases are often highly selective” (19). To put it another way, we justify our consumption based on which facet of our identity is activated at that particular moment. For example, if someone prides himself on being a “bargain hunter,” then he might justify an expensive purchase by saying he got a great deal on it. We constitute our identities through our consumptive choices, despite the fact that most of us live in denial (at least some of the time) about the fact that we are doing so.

Entrepreneurial discourses individualize success or failure, as seen in the self-branding literature described by Daniel Lair, Katie Sullivan and George Cheney (2005). According to the self-branding experts, “individuals [are] responsible for charting their own futures” (322). Practitioners of self-branding believe that success lies within reach if you can just package yourself correctly.

Inability to achieve success is your own fault, never the “fault of your employer or broader structures or policies” (333). In other words, wide scale adoption of the enterprising discourse prevents examination of larger social issues, instead blaming failure on the individual’s weaknesses, mistakes and lack of entrepreneurial drive.

The entrepreneurial focus on success and perfection are reflected in popular parenting literature. In “The Perfect Outdoor Kids’ Party!” article, the word “perfect” is mentioned twice: on the cover, and in the article’s lead-in.

Collectively, the emphasis on perfection contained within the parenting literature rests on a number of common assumptions: that a perfect childhood is both achievable and desirable; that parents have an obligation to their children to provide— or at least strive for—a perfect childhood; and that they (the magazine) are staffed by experts who can help parents in their pursuit of perfection. The implication behind all this contemporary parenting advice is that parents have to “get it right.”

## **Parents**

While we have, up to this point, consistently referred to “parents,” the sad fact is that because mom is usually seen as the primary caregiver of a child, her child’s failure is most often laid at her feet rather than dad’s. For example, Dr. Spock, in his 1945 book *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care*, assumed mom would stay at home, and addressed all of his advice to her. As Olga Silverstein and Beth Rashbaum (1994) noted, “[Mother] was to be affectionate but not too affectionate, warm but not too warm, to foster independence but to set boundaries, and so on” (23). It is still true today, that the good mother must walk a line so fine that the slightest bobble could turn her child into damaged goods. (For example, overly affectionate “smother mothers” are blamed for turning their sons into “momma’s boys.”)

The problem is that ten childcare experts will produce eleven different opinions about the “right” way to raise a child. Parents, particularly mothers, are in a double bind: they must try to parent perfectly, but because there are so many different opinions of what is perfect, they can never actually achieve perfection. Unfortunately, that’s the nature of entrepreneurialism. Every new “expert” brings something new, better, or simply different to the scene. Mothers find themselves striving for perfection in a climate that is constantly redefining perfection

I have a confession to make.

When I first read the “perfect party” headline, I was intrigued, but not for the reason I mentioned. The real reason I immediately flipped to the page in question was not to glean ideas for a future party, but to get a reading on the party I had thrown a few weeks earlier for my daughter. I wanted to see how my party stacked up against what these experts called perfect. In finding the lemonade stand, I realized for the first time that my idea of “the perfect party” was just that—mine. Which helped me realize that throughout the planning of

my daughter's perfect party, I never once questioned my own underlying assumptions of what constituted perfection.

For example, buying into the idea that a child's party needs to be perfect assumes that a child's entire life can and should be perfect. But I didn't think about that. Instead, I worried that my child might feel disappointed if her birthday celebration wasn't up to snuff. When I examined that worry more closely, I realized that I wanted to protect my child from disappointment of any kind. Emotionally, this didn't seem unreasonable, but cognitively, I knew it was neither possible nor desirable, which problematized the very notion of a child's "perfect life" entitlement.

Not only was I invested in the idea that a birthday celebration can and should be perfect, I also had a rigid list of ingredients necessary to achieve it: my time, my effort, and of course, money. Without sufficient amounts of these, it didn't matter how much fun the kids had, I couldn't bring myself to call a party perfect.

As I look back on it, I worried as much about what other people would think as I did about what Maya would think. Actually, what I really cared about was how this party would reflect on me, and my ability to enact the role of the "perfect" enterprising mother. In a sense, my child's birthday party had become a bangle on my wrist. Through it, I could show off a bit. What? You love the party? Well, shucks! I just threw it together at the last minute.

Throughout the party planning process, my actions were influenced by the enterprising parent discourse. I jumped onto the Internet to consult party planning "experts." I bought craft supplies, rented child sized table and chairs, and blew up dozens of helium balloons, because these were things that in my mind's eye, were omnipresent at the perfect child's birthday party.

My consumptive choices, while constraining my identity in some ways, were, in other ways, constrained by my feminist identity. For example, Maya wanted a princess theme for her party. I, however, on principle, refuse to buy anything Barbie or Disney Princess, which made planning the party a bit more challenging. And (primarily) because we were good enterprising parents who didn't want to "spoil" our child, we opted to forgo buying her gifts, in essence making the party itself her present.<sup>2</sup>

As this discussion indicates, many choices parents make are about identity, our own as well as our children's. As enterprising parents, we have the responsibility to shape our children's identity (whether this is something realistically achievable or not is rarely questioned), but what we don't seem to realize—or would prefer not to examine—is how much our own identity formation plays a part in our parenting decisions.

The "experts" that parents so often turn to for advice, have become gatekeepers for the enterprising parent's consumptive decisions. As parents, we have come to believe that we must choose the right products, "or else." Fortunately, there are plenty of experts out there willing to tell us what will happen if we choose the wrong products. The whole child safety industry is

built on fear-motivated, don't-let-this-happen-to-you reasoning. My mother didn't lock her kitchen cabinets, while mine require a special key to get into them. And now there are childproofing consultants who will come to your home and tell you all the different ways your child can injure himself and will also sell you the products to keep him safe.

The Baby Einstein product line is similarly based on anxiety, although in this case it's the fear of Junior falling behind in school. Never mind that school is several years off. In the pursuit of unexplored potentials, we enroll our children in a plethora of after-school activities. We take them on trips so that they can experience a larger sense of the world. We search exhaustively for the "right" preschool so they don't fall behind in kindergarten.

As parents, we are constantly consuming in order to give our children the best possible chances of success. In fact, we're so busy consuming that we rarely consider how our individual decisions shape and reproduce the larger culture. For example, Huggies Pull-ups are gender specific: the girls' version is pink with Disney princesses, while the boys' version is blue with Buzz Lightyear. Most people buy based on the "blue for boys, pink for girls" philosophy. It can be argued, however, that both options ratify and recreate the gendered cultural stereotypes of boys as active agents and girls as passive receptors, which is why I put both of my kids in the boy style. Furthermore, because I resented Huggies for not offering a gender-neutral choice, I ultimately switched to the Pampers version despite the higher cost.

Again, the choice of which training pants to buy was constrained by the feminist facet of my identity, while the decision to buy training pants (rather than going straight to underwear) was constrained by the opinion of potty training experts who said they would help my child become potty trained.

Resisting the enterprising parent discourse is not simply a matter of choosing to comply or resist. Rather, it is an on-going struggle that must be negotiated with each decision to be made.

We have discussed parents' participation in the enterprising discourse, but we haven't yet addressed how the children themselves are affected by it.

## **Children**

Parents are often treated as the consumptive gatekeepers for their kids, but at some point, children themselves become consumers who are also interpolated by entrepreneurial discourses.

Marketers have expended many resources trying to figure out how best to sell directly to our kids. Walk down just about any aisle of the grocery store, and you will see familiar kiddie characters hawking a variety of products. But it isn't just what they are trying to sell, but how they are doing it. While it can be argued that the media don't create racial and gendered stereotypes (Sternheimer, 2003), they clearly help reinforce them.

As a mother, one way I've tried to deal with the media onslaught is through avoidance. I don't buy violent toys, I monitor TV time closely, and I've already

mentioned my boycott of Barbie and Disney Princess. But I've come to realize that trying to save my kid from drowning by emptying the pool one bucket at a time isn't a very sensible solution.

A better idea is to teach them to swim before they go near the water.

I'm talking about nurturing critical consumers.

As Karen Sternheimer (2003) points out, while we shouldn't fear media exposure, neither should we ignore it. But to truly make a difference, both kids *and* parents "need to work towards becoming critical media consumers" (218).

As adults, we can model critical consumerism by "question[ing] whose viewpoint a news report or political pundit represents. This means questioning what we are told are facts by the news media and challenging the logic of hyper-consumption, that more is better and that fulfillment and good citizenship is accomplished by spending." (Sternheimer, 2003: 218)

Rather than complaining about the media, we should spend more time analyzing it. We should look at how media representations of race and gender reflect and recreate social inequities. We must also scrutinize the media itself, asking who is producing it and why, what they are leaving out, and whose voices are being silenced.

But nurturing critical consumers is only half the battle.

Yes, we live in a society saturated by consumptive messages. Yes, we are culturally interpellated by the enterprising discourse. But neither one of these statements is inherently good or bad.

The problem arises when certain aspects of the entrepreneurial discourse are exaggerated at the expense of alternate interpretations. For example, focusing on material consumption causes us to frame ourselves primarily as consumers, thus flattening opportunities for personal growth. Women often justify breast augmentation by saying that it will enhance their self-esteem. Men going through a mid-life crisis might buy themselves a sports car. Both are experiencing a "lack" in their lives. But instead of looking inside themselves to find out why, they turn to the external world of consumption to fill the void. A consumer driven identity prevents them from seeing that personal development can be achieved through means other than material consumption. To do that, they would need to develop alternative identity resources.

Chris Weedon (1997), a post-structuralist feminist, recognized that identities are never entirely freely chosen; rather, agency is enacted through choosing among or combining in new and creative ways discourses that are already in circulation. So, although it may be true that we can't remove ourselves completely from the influences of entrepreneurial discourse, what we *can* do is appropriate new or different discourses, like those we describe below, in a way that develops our identity in enriching ways.

Another exaggerated aspect of entrepreneurialism is its focus on individualism. We've already pointed out that the self-branding literature puts personal success or failure in the hands of the individual. But the consequences of individualism go beyond that, because in an entrepreneurial society,

“[i]ndividualistic competition for wealth offers no rewards for the work of care” (Folbre, 2001: 24).

Our patriarchal culture has concluded that care-giving activities are unproductive, and that caring work is the “natural” bailiwick of women (Folbre, 2001). This has resulted in a cultural devaluing of both caring activities and the people who perform them, which explains why school teachers and nurses have historically been underpaid, undervalued women.

The entrepreneurial focus on material consumption and individualism has been insidiously stripping our culture of its ethic of care for our fellow human beings. Focusing on the economic success of the individual, poverty is no longer a problem belonging to society at large, but a symptom of personal shortcomings (du Gay, 1996). We would prefer to look after ourselves, letting others fend for themselves, which is why we don’t mind paying high taxes for schools as long as it’s our own children who benefit (Folbre, 2001). In the same vein, “businesses that don’t want to pay taxes or a living wage [and, thus, care for and be accountable to local communities] are finding it easier to relocate to other countries” (Folbre, 2001: xvi). Management’s focus on the bottom line means they no longer feel obligated to invest in the community’s production of capable, dependable workers.

To combat this trend, children (and adults) must come to see themselves as part of an interconnected global community, and to feel a responsibility towards others, even when those others speak a different language, have a different skin tone, or occupy a different economic stratum.

By helping our children to adopt an ethic of care, defined by Carol Gilligan (1982) as “an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, to taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone” (62), and teaching them to think independently, to ask critical questions and to challenge the status quo, we give our burgeoning adults the tools to see that consumption isn’t the only way, or even the best way, to attain happiness. We can teach our children that material consumption often has a cost associated with it, whether it’s the oppressed labor force from a third world country used to produce a good, or the space that product will ultimately consume in a municipal landfill.

How is this to be accomplished? As the enterprising parent discourse demonstrates, one way is through the parents. Parents can learn to become more critical consumers, as well as modeling an observable manifestation of care for others. Parents can work to strengthen values of love, obligation and reciprocity within the family, which, according to Nancy Folbre (2001), can “create a cultural environment in which the individual pursuit of self-interest can lead to healthy outcomes” (231).

Note that pursuing self-interest does not exclude the possibility of service or care. In truth, self-interest must be accommodated in order for a cultural shift of this kind to succeed. It is, however, important that our self-interest be motivated by something beyond financial or material gain, and that is care for



and service to others.

It is especially important for fathers to model a service attitude, because the cultural stereotype is for dad to earn the money, leaving the caring projects—helping an elderly neighbor, raising the kids, or serving on the PTO—to mom. But keeping mothers as the primary altruists in the family “separates care from power, and . . . reduces the overall level of social and economic support for caring work” (Folbre, 2001: 231).

But this shouldn’t be construed as just another item to add to the list of things a parent must teach her child in order to “get it right.” It isn’t just parents who should be responsible for teaching children these skills. Ideally, the entire society would adopt them. For example, schools would, instead of simply “teaching to the test” as the current educational atmosphere encourages, teach beyond the test, to give children critical thinking life skills early on. Schools could incorporate and institutionalize service learning<sup>3</sup> into their curriculum, thereby fostering both critical thinking and service ([www.learnandserve.org](http://www.learnandserve.org)). Perhaps a mandatory year of service for every graduating high school senior would be a good place to start.

At a societal level, our definition of good citizenship needs to shift from personal consumption to service. Not just community service, but a *culture* of service that appreciates care given to others, economically as well as ideologically. Children would be seen as a product of the community, rather than just the parents. Schools would be fully funded, with schoolteachers being highly esteemed and well paid. Global corporations would accept responsibility for their role in the community, rather than simply getting a free ride. But all of this is a long way off. A good place to start is for each of us to begin to develop and expand our identity repertoire by actively resisting entrepreneurial discourses.

<sup>1</sup>From this point on, sections discussing experiences of the first author will be written using “I”, while analysis and discussion will be written using “we.”

<sup>2</sup>I am not alone in this line of thought. Indeed, I got the idea from a friend who throws big birthday bashes every other year for her children, only buying them presents in the off years. Another friend explained to her son how much a birthday party costs, and he opted for a small family celebration and a check.

<sup>3</sup>Service-learning integrates community service projects with classroom learning by engaging students in the educational process, using what they learn in the classroom to solve real-life problems.

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