

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

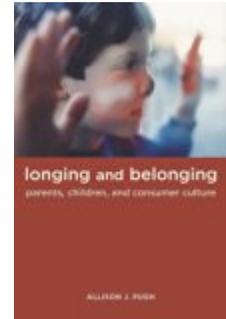


Allison J. Pugh. *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 320 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25843-3; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25844-0.

Reviewed by Hilary Levey (Harvard University)

Published on H-Childhood (July, 2010)

Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan



Golden Tickets: Inequality and Children's Consumption

In an era of unemployment and bonus backlash, serious scholarship about consumption is timely. If a work is about how children learn to be consumers, it is also vital. Sociologist Allison J. Pugh's recent book, *Longing and Belonging*, thoughtfully and richly details both, examining how a diverse set of parents raise their children to relate to money. Pugh did her research in Oakland, California, in three elementary schools located in two different geographic areas of the city: Sojourner Truth, a public school mainly populated by low-income families, and Arrowhead and Oceanview, a private school and a public school that cater to more affluent families. Over three and a half years, she observed and conducted interviews with fifty-four families with children aged five to nine to explore the ways in which children from different class backgrounds acquire and use knowledge about consumer culture.

At first glance this research might seem to be derivative of Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (2003). While Lareau's overall argument is reinforced here, Pugh deftly zeroes in on, and explains, a particularly important aspect of child-rearing—how parents teach their children to interact with one specific thing, money. She argues that childhood consumption is quite relational and symbolic, helping to define the nature of caring relationships and one's place in peer culture. While families from different classes consume in different ways, and develop different strategies to cope with consumption, one of the more powerful messages

of *Longing and Belonging* is the universality of children's consumer culture.

Over the course of eight chapters Pugh introduces several interesting concepts to illustrate her arguments. One of these is the "economy of dignity," which describes the ways in which children relate to their peers through material goods; the currency in this economy is varied forms of scrip. Another interesting term Pugh develops is "pathway consumption." Pathway consumption involves parental spending that is aimed at children's futures. While the former deals with material childhood consumption in the present, the latter is rooted in less tangible forms of consumption that capture parental aspirations.

As these two concepts suggest, much of *Longing and Belonging* is about symbols, since consumption defines our relationships both in the present and in the future. Particular items carry symbolic importance for children, like Pokemon, along with practices, like allowance giving and tooth fairy gifts. Pugh shows the processes by which kids are taught how to interpret these varied symbols.

Of course, many parents are ambivalent about the symbolic power of consumptive goods and practices, which is especially evident in chapter 6 when Pugh describes how some parents resist particular spending. One gets the sense that all of Pugh's parents, and Pugh, feel that something has changed in American childhood—that consumer culture is more powerful than ever before.

However, is it true that there has been a marked shift in childhood consumption? Yes, we do know that the market itself, particularly the amount of money spent by children, has grown. Yet have not generations always bemoaned changes seen in the succeeding generation? Historian Steven Mintz has shown this to be true for over three centuries in the United States. The reader does not get a strong sense of the ways in which these patterns and behaviors are historically true. The work of such scholars as Iona and Peter Opie and David Nasaw shows both how children valued gifts of various kinds and how they spent their pennies (often on candy) in the past. It would have been helpful if Pugh had provided an explanation of how the children's market evolved into its current form and the ways in which it is different today.

One area in which *Longing and Belonging* is particularly strong is in its discussion of methods in chapter 2. I greatly appreciated the detailed description of the ethnographic process and the ways in which Pugh's identity played a role in this research. I did feel the lack of children's voices in much of the work though; while some of the children's observed comments are included, I would have liked to have seen more systematic analysis of their thoughts. Pugh explained that she did not feel she could interview children, but future studies should focus on the children's perspective.

With a book as rich as this one, it can spawn its own research agenda. One area that Pugh, or other scholars, should tackle include examining the role of technology, especially social media like Facebook or cell phones, to

both create and disseminate children's consumptive patterns. Additionally, as with a lot of social science research, the question of how much has changed since the 2008 recession looms large. What has happened to these families and their consumption patterns? To what extent is the children's economy still "bulletproof," impervious to downturns?

As I read *Longing and Belonging* I kept thinking of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) (though I suppose most children would know the story from Tim Burton's recent movie remake). Poor Charlie Bucket had to contend with wealthier children who could afford to buy chocolate bars by the box-full, while he was only able to open three bars in his search for the golden ticket (certainly a powerful alternative scrip). One of the more heartbreaking scenes from the original 1971 *Willy Wonka* movie is when Charlie's math teacher asks each child how many Wonka bars each of them has opened. Charlie has to admit to the incredulous teacher that he has only had two as his classmates laugh and twitter around him. Consumption of the bars secured a place in a peer culture that Charlie longed to, but could not, fully belong to. His parents and grandparents also longed to buy him a bar with a golden ticket, both as part of the economy of dignity and as pathway consumption. Of course, despite fewer opportunities, Charlie ends up walking into the factory next to the more affluent children, and he eventually emerges as the hero and winner, his future secured with riches and other material goods. If securing upward mobility were only so simple.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-childhood>

Citation: Hilary Levey. Review of Pugh, Allison J., *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. July, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29551>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.