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Looking Good and Taking Care: Consumer Culture, Identity, and Poor, Minority, Urban Tweens

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Looking Good and Taking Care: Consumer Culture, Identity and Poor, Minority, Urban

Tweens

by

Elizabeth Edgecomb

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the students of Scholastic Middle who allowed me to write it and made me laugh. Thank you.

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As I try and complete these acknowledgements I nearly give up the task due to its immensity. I can't think of this dissertation without thinking of the years, classes, conversations, and support that got me here. There are so many people who have helped me reach this point. I realize with great chagrin that I will not, cannot, possibly list them all. Therefore, I give in to the incompleteness of this record and list names, rather than detail my appreciation, not simply because that would require pages and pages to be added to this dissertation, but because they deserve to be told why in person.

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Marcy Chvasta

Dave Steinweg

Loyd Pettegrew

Lori Roscoe

Jillian Tullis

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Looking Good and Taking Care: Consumer Culture, Identity, and Poor, Minority, Urban
Tweens

Elizabeth Edgecomb

ABSTRACT

Looking Good and Taking Care: Consumer Culture, Identity, and Poor, Minority, Urban Tweens is an ethnographic examination of how poor, minority, urban tweens (age 7-14) use consumer culture to create and perform their personal and social identities. Although portrayed in mass media as selfish and hedonistic, this work finds tweens creating profoundly social, giving, and caring identities and relationships through consumption. Their use of consumer culture is also a form of political resistance that subverts their place in the age, class, and race hierarchy. These tweens use “looking good” (attention to grooming, style, and behaving respectably), and not name brand goods, to show they have respect for themselves, that their families care about them, and that, by extension, society in general should care for and about them. Far from seeking status through consuming, the tweens largely seek belonging and care. They also utilize both consumption and denial of their consumer desires to show care for their families. Furthermore, the tweens use consumer culture to enact resistance against the most tangible form of social control in their lives—school—by employing products and consumer knowledge to subvert the rules of uniforms and structured school time.

Chapter 1
Introduction
Green Socks

I sat in our assigned area of the bleachers, the furthest from the entry doors, at the corner of two outside walls near the glass-paned emergency exit door. I sat in my normal spot, three rows from the bottom, in the middle of the fourth grade section. We talked. The bleachers shook each time someone walked up them or emphatically readjusted their position. We waited this morning—as we did every school morning—for the daily announcements and release to our classrooms. The teachers sat in their metal folding chairs on the far side of the gym, chatting, and watching us. As always, they remained largely oblivious to us, their attention caught only occasionally by the too-loud cuss word, the crash of someone falling or having been pushed, or crying from one of the younger kids.

We talked and joked about the serious topics of our 10-year-old lives—video games, baseball, clothes, the math test, TV, and basketball and cheerleading tryouts—all the essentials. I'm not sure what happened exactly; the moments that led into the exchange are blurry. What stands out is Lynn. He was small for his age and had curly, blond hair. Like a lot of small kids, he found class clown a good role. I don't remember what I said to him. I may have made a smart-assed or mean comment (I may be the protagonist of my own story, but I am certainly not a sainted one). Whether an initial attack or retaliation, Lynn focused in on my green socks and made sure that everyone else noticed them, too. "Yeah, well the rest of us don't wear the same socks every day." My chest seized up and my vision blurred as anxiety and fear rose up within me. He pointed out what I had so hoped no one would notice—I wore the same pair of emerald green socks every day. He hit me where I was most vulnerable—my often second-hand and always too-limited wardrobe.

In first grade, I wore mismatched socks to school. One was a tall Strawberry Shortcake sock depicting blue sky and fluffy white clouds, along with a picture of Strawberry Shortcake, her name printed prettily above her. The other sock was a short, white bobby sock with lace around the top. A kid on the bus made fun of me for wearing mismatched socks. After that day, I swore I would never wear them again. From that point on, I spent as much time as it took the night before to find socks that matched.

By fourth grade, I had not forgotten that lesson and still worked to make sure my socks matched. This wasn't easy given the messy state of my family's house and our perpetual lack of money. Every night I washed my green socks in the bathroom sink with bar soap and hung them on the shower rod to dry. I engaged in this ritual soon after I came home from school so the socks would be dry the next morning. Every morning I took them off the shower rod and tried to no avail to shake the stiffness out of them before pulling the scratchy green fabric over my feet.

Lynn's announcement created terror in me. My throat and chest tightened as if they'd been immediately petrified like the rock forest in the West I'd once visited with my grandparents. I grappled with what to say. I was trapped. What could make this go away?

I heard a derisive laugh. I didn't think it was my laugh until I heard my own announcement following it. "Obviously, I have several pairs of these socks; I bought a pack of them because green is my favorite color." I told this lie with conviction and intensity. Although Lynn rolled his eyes, he let the subject drop. Eventually my heart began to beat normally. When the bell rang, I got up and walked into the hall with the others. I had survived the humiliation of my poverty once again.

Determining the Questions

Although by no means my first humiliation, this childhood experience and others like it have been most formative in determining my personal and professional life goals. In school, I realized the stigma involved with poverty and consumption. Not buying the things that one's peers deem necessary for enacting a "normal" identity in a consumer culture means being shunned, left out, and humiliated. Not participating adequately in a consumer culture means lacking an unstigmatized, worthwhile, or normal identity.

Until I left for college, I spent a great deal of my time and energy trying to appear middle-class and avoid the public shame of poverty. I tried to be seen as worthy and normal, despite a lack of means and understanding as to what normal meant or how to create it. I whined and wheedled to get more than my fair share of family resources in order to buy clothes, makeup, hair products, and jewelry. I got a job at 16 and worked as many hours as the manager would allow—often 30 hours or more a week. I used my paychecks to buy everything from shampoo, to sodas at lunch, to clothes. I lied to friends, bosses, and school administrators about why I did not have a home phone. “My mom hates the technology; she thinks it’s an invasion of privacy.” Too bad I knew nothing of Thoreau, the simplicity movement, or downshifting; my lies would have been spectacular. I aspired to pass as middle-class (or at least my interpretation of it) to avoid any outward indication of the poverty in which I lived.

My memories of growing up poor are not those of the good hearted, clean, and moral but down on their luck poor (see Allison, 1994, 1996). My memories are of fear, shame, and a struggle for resources. As I became a tween¹ and then a teen, my fears did not cluster around the electricity being turned off (I had lived through that several times) or the threats of foreclosure (lived through that as well). I feared being judged unworthy and abnormal by my peers and teachers. Unworthy of what? Positive attention, interest, *being*. All the things I imagined came with being seen as normal. What I see now as the failings of meritocracy and the value placed on conspicuous consumption in a consumer culture I saw then as *personal* failings.

My story is not unique. It is one story of being poor in a consumer culture. As I type on my laptop computer in my office in an institution of higher learning while doing my white-collar work in business casual attire, one could read my story as a simple and simplistic bootstrap narrative. I wonder how others—specifically those going through adolescent turmoil now with the burden of poverty in a consumer culture of luxury

¹Tween is a term used to denote individuals roughly ages 7-14 who are in the developmental stages between childhood and adolescence (Cook, 2004).

expectations that far outstrips my own nearly 20 years ago²—negotiate their own identities, self-image, and relations with others.³ I wonder whether and how urban, minority youth—those whose consumption practices get them labeled “a nation of thieves” (Austin, 1994a, 1994b) and “combat consumers” (Chin, 2001)—reconcile their identities and consumption. The expectation of consumption is key to identity in a consumer culture and thus has material effects on individuals.

Consumer Culture

Consumer culture and its attendant luxury and brand-name goods have expanded and become more intricately linked with the everyday lives of Americans than ever before (Bauman, 2005; Pugh, 2005, 2009; Schor 1998, 2004). But beyond the created desires for the name brand, the very *act* of consuming is tied to identity and even citizenship in a consumer culture. To consume, and be seen consuming, is the basis for identification by others and the self. Bauman (2005) says,

The way present-day society shapes up its members is dictated first and foremost by the need to play the role of consumer, and the norm our society holds up to its members is that of the ability and willingness to play it. (p. 24)

For Bauman (2005), being “normal” means being able and willing to consume. To prove this normalcy, one must consume conspicuously. Veblen (1994) finds conspicuous consumption necessary to the positive reputations of “gentleman of leisure,” or those who can afford to consume beyond basic needs. Conspicuous consumption, combined with a meritocratic morality, means that the poor are looked down upon for their lack of means (see Allison, 1994, 1996; hooks, 2000), and explains how those unable to consume conspicuously are not “normal” citizens in Bauman’s (2005) terms.

The “new consumerism” (Schor, 1998) extends and complicates the consumption needed for normal status. According to Schor (1998), new consumerism is fueled by three factors: the expansion of reference groups, the creation of new products, and the

² Current consumer culture targets children earlier and in more direct ways through television, school, and the internet than ever before and previews a more decadent standard of living (Schor, 2004, p. 17).

³ Although the current economic collapse has stunted much luxury spending, there is no way to predict if this downward trend will continue once the economy stabilizes or if the luxury boom will reassert itself.

upgrading of old products. Using Schor's classification we can see how individuals and communities are pushed to keep up with their neighbors' consumption and that of characters and celebrities seen on TV. This consumption increases in cost and quantity as new products are created in the market (for example, bottled water and cell phones) and old products are upgraded to luxury versions (for example, granite countertops). We live in a society where our identities and social places are revealed to others and ourselves through consumption (Bauman, 2005; Schor, 1998; Veblen, 1994). "Normal life," the life of the conspicuous consumer, is flaunted in the marketing and consumption of consumer goods. These constructed depictions of "normal" are intended to create a desire to consume, because consuming is citizenship and worthwhile status in society. The rules and resources of the structure of consumption, in the forms of buying, altering, and displaying of goods, offer a known system of identity construction and estimations of self-worth. Despite the importance of consumer culture to identity and citizenship in society, there are still gaps in the literature addressing the subject. Most notable according to Chin (2001) is the lack of information from minority, urban youth in moderately poor (as opposed to ur-ghetto)⁴ areas about their consumption.

Perhaps in reaction to the expansion of consumer culture itself noted above, consumer research has grown extensively over the past decade. New publications like the *Journal of Consumer Culture* have been created. Marketing researchers are particularly interested in the consumption habits of children and teens (see Schor, 2004), though teenagers, tweens, and children in general have less often been the focus of scholarly inquiry in other fields including communication and sociology. Teens' and tweens' consumer choices are understudied and have rarely been examined using ethnographic methods to explore the meaning-making systems of youth themselves. In addition, little work has been done to investigate the consumption of those without the ability to buy (see Chin, 1993, 2001; Pugh, 2004, 2005, 2009).

Why Poor, Minority, Urban Tweens?

Chin (2001) calls for consumer research outside of the middle-class. Cook (2005) advises studying the everyday moments of children's and teens' lives for cues to their

⁴ Chin (2001) defines "ur-ghettos" as inner-city areas at the extreme end of poverty. These are not "typical" inner-city communities (p. 59).

consumption behavior. Martens, Southerton, and Scott (2004) believe children's consumption should be understood as practice and investigated in the moments of everyday life. Warde (2005) appeals to consumer culture researchers to focus on theories of practice⁵ such as Giddens's structuration theory (1986). Critical ethnographers (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Conquergood, 1991) focus on populations and contexts that illuminate issues in the population at large. Following these theorists and their suggestions, I am engaging in an ethnographic study of poor,⁶ minority, urban tweens that explores the ways they create and manage their consumer desires and identities and how these desires and identities impact their relationships with others. Low-income, minority, urban tweens offer a depth of understanding about their own lives and identity formation as well as tensions in consumption-meaning and decision-making for other groups in U.S. consumer culture.

The role of consumption in the creation of the identities of poor, minority, urban tweens is important for at least two reasons. First, the identity construction process is continuous and complex especially during adolescence (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Adolescence is a time of intense identity construction and role confusion. Tweens and teens, no longer under the complete control of family or guardians, explore the world independently (although still in highly disciplined ways) for the first time. Also important to the identity formation process is the advancement of moral reasoning to include concerns about the social order and contract (Frydenberg, 1997). Adolescents begin to understand the "implicit reciprocal contract between the individual and society" (p. 10), or the ways that agency and structure work together, and therefore begin to weigh their options regarding conformity and originality and understand these decisions to have

⁵ Warde (2005) writes, "Practice theories comprehend non-instrumentalist notions of conduct, both observing the role of routine on the one hand, and emotion, embodiment and desire on the other" (p. 136). They are theories that attend to both larger structural issues and the actions of individuals as these two components influence each other.

⁶ All research participants qualified for free or reduced lunch according to the standards of the National School Lunch Program. To qualify for reduced lunch, a family of four must have a gross income not exceeding \$38,203 (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 2007, p. 8687). For free lunch, gross income may not exceed \$26,845. However, according to the administration of the school most children that attended lived below the federal poverty line of \$20,650 for a family of four (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, p. 8687). These typical standards are used to define "poor" in this study.

moral consequences. These new more complex understandings of the self and society, along with other identity work, can cause conflict, and “the more a culture gives free choices and decisions as to who one is going to be, the more open conflict is aroused” (Evans, 1967). In a consumer culture, those choices are endless for those with means and can cause great strife for those without. The identity formation process that takes place during adolescence is, like the rest of the life cycle in a consumer society, highly enmeshed with consumer goods.

Tweens’ attempts at identity construction are intimately tied to marketing. However, unlike other aspects of the life cycle, “tween” is a time in life directly founded in the marketplace. The very term “tween” is one created by marketers (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Myers, 2004; Quart, 2003).⁷ Tweens become important to marketers around age ten when the necessary “marketing awareness and savvy-ness” develops (Myers, 2004). In modern culture, children become desiring consumers at younger and younger ages (through television, interacting with peer groups earlier such as in day care, and parents and others purchasing more goods), which leaves virtually no aspect of the life cycle free from marketing and consumer culture (Schor, 2004). We learn from a young age the connections between identity and buying, even if that knowledge remains in practical consciousness⁸.

Tweens explore this culture with the goal of creating an individual yet socially acceptable identity—an identity that will transition into what they may feel are their permanent, adult identities. These identities are both personal and social, denoting an inner idea of the various dimensions of who one is and various incarnations of an outer self. For instance, I may feel that at my core I am a caring person. However, my various outer identities (scholar, friend, daughter, and yoga student) may show this inner self more or less depending on the situation. Within all of these identities is a component of a

⁷ “Tween” was created by marketers and is more focused on girls than boys (Cook & Kaiser, 2004; see Mitchel & Reid-Walsh, 2005) and is traced by Cook and Kaiser (2004) to a 1987 article in *Marketing and Media Decisions*. The term tween indicated a more sexualized girl age 9-15 than the previous pre-teen or sub-teen terms (Cook and Kaiser, 2004).

⁸ Practical consciousness houses the knowledge that we have to maneuver through social life but that we do not “know we know” and therefore cannot articulate or interrogate (Giddens, 1986). This concept is further discussed in Chapter 4.

“material self” connected to material goods (W. James, 2007). This material self consists of the aspects of material existence over which we feel a sense of ownership such as our bodies, families, and possessions.

An individual’s need to create identity in the constant flux of mass culture intimately fits the agendas of marketing and consumer culture. The market is ever ready to create and provide products to build personal and social identity. Galbraith (2000) calls this instance of structuration (Giddens, 1986) the “dependence effect”: marketers both create and satisfy consumer wants, creating a mutually determining and reflexive process. One uses consumer goods to create a “better” self by furthering the progress narrative that helps create our identities, both individually and collectively. The constant tension between the desire for uniqueness and maintaining social connection via recognizable consumer display complicates the process.

Zukin and Macquire (2004) say consumption “has assumed overwhelming significance in modern life” (p. 173). One must consume as an acceptable and adequate member of a consumer culture (Bauman, 2005). Crawford (1992) states, “personal identity depends on one’s ability to compose a coherent self image through the selection of a distinct personal set of commodities” (p. 12).

A second impetus for study: poor tweens’ identity constructions are particularly illuminating because of the tension between financial means and desired or needed goods and services. This tension is exacerbated when “needs” are consistently expanding (Schor, 1998). Additional exploration of this group will help us further understand how consumption, class, and race factor together to influence identity construction. One’s foremost identity, according to Bauman (2005), is one of consumer. Race and class significantly factor into this consumer identity. For instance, black⁹ culture and stereotypes regarding Black people factor into choices made about what to consume and

⁹ Following Carter (2003), I use “Black” to refer to a person or group of persons while using “black” to reference an abstraction, idea, or thing. In addition, I have chosen to use the terms Black/black rather than African-American for two reasons. First, and most important, Black is the term used by the students I worked with when referencing themselves. Second, according to Sigelman, Tuch, and Martin (2005), preference for the terms African-American or Black are split virtually evenly amongst Americans of African descent. Therefore, Black has the most resonance for my participants and is an acceptable term for Americans of African descent.

the meanings attributed to that consumption. In addition, the inability to buy things deemed necessary for a “normal” identity may generate focused and conscious engagement in attaining these things. This conscious engagement might otherwise be bypassed by the immediate gratification of these desires (Pugh, 2004). For instance, I don’t think a great deal about buying a cup of coffee because the expense is nominal for me. However, buying a car affords a great deal of introspection, as it is a purchase I cannot often make. For the tweens in this study, seemingly small purchases require a great deal of thought. The necessity of making do with less and with substitutes for desired goods can lead to creativity that might not otherwise be utilized in consumer decision-making and commodity use (see Chin, 1999). The tension between desire and fulfillment may also offer greater insight into the ways that other U.S. citizens use consumer goods and consumer culture to create identities.

Growing up, I often felt shamed and misunderstood by those I believe were judging me by my class, something largely indicated by both my limited ability to participate in consumer culture and my choices when I could participate. My identity is shaped by having grown up poor in a consumer society and my current participation as a member of what I call the “staged middle-class” of graduate school, a place where one is fully accepted into and expected to appropriately engage with a middle-class setting despite a lack of financial resources. I am an individual who felt, and sometimes still feels, monofaceted, limited, and controlled by a consumer culture that stigmatizes me for being unable to fully participate. This culture critiques the tastes of the lower classes in order to maintain the class hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984). The tastes of the upper classes are further understood as normative, intelligent, and right. It is a culture that critiques me and others in the lower classes for our consumer choices and desires.

There are many differences in the ways that the tweens I worked with and I are viewed. I grew up in a rural area where being white among a majority of whites, I was not forced to bear the stigma of being a person of color in a racist society. Despite these differences, there are similarities among us. My memories of consuming in my youth—elating moments when I was free to buy what I desired, unsure moments when it was unclear what I was expected to consume or how to go about it, moments of simultaneous

desire and denial when faced with things I wanted and could not have, and devastating moments when others found my choices lacking—are experienced by those who desire to participate with limited financial means in a consumer culture. Looking back on these experiences, I realize that my desires and choices were the result of complex interactions and thought processes influenced by mass culture, family, friends, and my own personality. Despite class stigma I, and others, were and are making intelligent, caring, and informed decisions despite the structural limitations of financial and social means.

The consumption and tastes of poor, minority, urban tweens are most often seen not as their response to a system that constrains them in significant ways, but as a manifestation of bad values, including superficiality and selfishness. Their consumption is stigmatized as hedonistic and irrational by the media, upper classes, and whites (Chin, 2001; Kotlowitz, 1999, 2000; Nightingale, 1993). They are stigmatized for their inability to consume and for the consumer choices they make. Their choices are interpreted as valuing consumption, leisure, and immediate gratification over long-term goals like social stability, connection, and self-sufficiency. As Chin (2001) says, “In a society that criminalizes the consumption of urban minority youth, what is needed is not just a questioning of that assumption, but a realistic assessment of what that consumption is” (p. 28). This demonizing view of consumption is an unfair, homogenous image of a diverse group. This view does not take into account the constraints on consumption, the hedonistic consumption of other groups, or the actual consumption practices. In an attempt to correct this demonizing perception, in-depth explorations of how poor, minority, urban tweens are making their consumer decisions are necessary. In other words, to learn more about how poor, minority, urban tweens view and engage in consumption, an ethnographic study is most appropriate.

Ethnography as a Complex Assessment

This work attempts to at least partially rectify unfair, racist, and classist representations by offering an in-depth examination of how poor, minority, urban tweens consume and how they talk about their consumer desires, buying habits, and relationships. Focusing on what poor, minority, urban tweens are seen to do (their

consumption) *as well as* the ways they make sense of consumer culture and their own consumption offers insight into their motives for and understanding of consumption.

Ethnography allows me to enter into the everyday moments of the tween's lives and ask them directly about consumption and consumer culture. In ethnography, the lived experiences of the participants' lives are more fully documented and provide the basis for questions asked in both formal and informal interviews.

Although still controlled by my (the researcher's) interests and interpretations, ethnography offers a fuller, more nuanced, and participant-driven project than other methods. Through over 400 hours of participant observation in a middle school with a 100 percent low-income, minority student population and 25 in-depth interviews with students, I have tried to understand the ways these tweens make sense of their identities through consumer culture.

The ability to consider and participate in complex phenomena afforded by ethnographic study is important to this project. As Chin (1993), who conducted an in-depth ethnographic study with poor, minority, urban children states, "Unlike the objects consumed . . . the everyday practices of consumption are neither mass-produced nor pre-fabricated. They cannot be conceptualized easily as hedonic, resistant, nor hegemonic" (p. 104). Ethnography helps me (and you, the reader) to experience these individuals *as* individuals, as they navigate the larger social structures that constitute their lives.

Making the Connection: Preview of Chapters

What I have learned from my ethnographic observations and interviews is not only that the students at Scholastic Middle are fascinating, intelligent, fun, and generous, but that they also understand their identities and relationships with others in profoundly social, giving, caring, and politically savvy ways. How the tweens understand themselves is intimately tied to who they are for others and how their desires and needs affect others. In the following chapters of this dissertation, I outline my research with poor, urban, minority tweens and explicate three main themes found in how the tweens understand their consumer identities.

Chapter 2, "Middle School Redux," focuses on how I conducted my fieldwork and interviews. I discuss the middle school where the students and I were and my

entrance into the school as a researcher and volunteer. I also discuss tenets of ethnography and autoethnography that inform the method and writing of this work.

Chapter 3, “‘The Old, Rich, White Lady’: A 28-year-old Graduate Student Does Fieldwork,” is commentary on my position as a researcher and how it was both hindered and helped by some of my own shortcomings dealing with children. I also discuss the importance of the role of the “liminal adult”¹⁰ and the necessity of understanding informed consent as a relational process.

In Chapter 4, “Setting the Theoretical Scene,” I situate this work academically. I begin with an argument for understanding our contemporary condition as a modern one and move into a discussion of Giddens’s structuration theory (1986) and Foucault’s disciplinary society (1977) in order to create a framework for structural and agential tensions inherent in our current consumer system. I also address Bourdieu’s (1984) work on taste, Munoz’s (1999) disidentification theory, and Goffman’s theory of impression management (1959, 1963) to further explain how individuals negotiate these tensions.

Having outlined the theoretical background for the work, I turn to a description of the individual tweens who made this work possible. Chapter 5, “Where We From: Setting the Lived Scene” details my greatest source of insight—the tweens who allowed me to follow them around and question them incessantly. This section gives a bit of background on their city and neighborhoods and provides character sketches of the 25 students who allowed me to interview them for this project.

In Chapter 6, “Looking Good: The Performance of the Ethic of Care,” I detail how the tweens talk about performing care for themselves through consumption. This section is key to understanding the ways the tweens do ego work through consuming. It shows how the tweens relate “looking good,” a state only sometimes achieved through the use of brand name clothing, to a sense of care and respect for themselves. By “looking good,” the tweens show they care for themselves as well as that their families care about them. In turn, this sense of self-care encourages others (strangers, teachers, and others they meet in passing) to care about them as well. In other words, the logic of an ethic of care is: because I have respect for myself and my family has respect for me, as

¹⁰ Based on V. Turner’s (1969, 1987, 2001) concept of the liminal space.

evidenced by my “looking good,” you should have respect for me as well. In addition to looking good and showing and receiving self-care in doing so, the tweens are interested in showing care for others.

Chapter 7, “Taking Care: Consuming and Not Consuming for Others,” moves from seeing the work that the tweens put into creating an identity via an ethic of care toward explicating the performances of care they offer *to* others. The tweens work hard to create egalitarian relationships between themselves and others. They work to remove focus from what others don’t have and try to help their families negotiate financial tensions. Their attitudes towards those with more or less resources involve strict codes of self-control and nonjudgment. Phrases like, “You don’t know their circumstances,” and “That’s their business” are used to describe those who do not “look good.” In addition, words like “teamwork,” “helping,” and “respect” infuse their talk about families, particularly mothers. They emphasize that care for others is one of their responsibilities—in behavior *and* consumption. Care for themselves and others is also played out in political ways at school.

In Chapter 8, “Playing the Rules: The Politics of Consumption and Care,” I focus on the ways the tweens use creativity, code switching, and play to redefine rules and create a sense of self, others, and society that tests the constraints placed on them by age, race, gender, and class. Through discipline (Foucault, 1977) and structuration (Giddens, 1986), I show how the tweens manipulate aspects of the school system to suit their own needs. Here I argue that the tweens are making savvy political and subversive personal and social identity moves including, but going beyond, care.

In the final chapter, “So What?: A Closing Picture,” I offer a closing analysis of the implications of this research for the researcher, the participants, and understandings of U.S. consumer culture.

Chapter 2
Middle School Redux
Wedding Rings

“Miss Edgecomb, Miss Edgecomb, come over here,” I hear a disembodied female voice calling from behind me. I turn to survey the students at the outside picnic tables. Some are still eating lunch while others have moved on to play and homework. As I look, I see eighth grader Kaia¹¹ waving her hand to flag me over to the table where she is in intense conversation with two of the sixth grade girls, Ezola and Macella. Before I even sit down, I begin to get the basics of their conversation. It’s about wedding rings. As soon as my butt hits the bench, I get rapid fire questions from all three: “It goes on the right hand, right?” asks Ezola with less confidence than Kaia’s, “No, I know it’s the left hand,” while Macella characteristically looks interested but makes no comment.

I feel my face scrunch up in concentration as I try to remember if this is knowledge I possess. I don’t think I’ve ever known. It’s never come up. I work with a bunch of hippie academics who don’t really talk about marriage. After a second, I can stall no longer and sheepishly answer, “I don’t really know which hand, but it always goes on the ring finger.” This weak response garners the exasperated looks I knew it would. I see Mr. Mason; a teacher I know is married. Trying to redeem myself by getting them an answer, I ask him. “Mr. Mason, which hand do you wear your wedding ring on?”

Without missing a step, he replies, “The left ring finger,” as he continues past the table. Unlike me, Mr. Mason expects the questioning of middle schoolers. I, however, have just shown myself void of useful knowledge yet again and realize that I need to think better on my feet.

¹¹ All individuals who appear in this study are identified by pseudonyms. Following Carter (2003), I “attempted to retain the distinctiveness of the respondent’s real name, thereby illuminating the difference between the naming styles generally employed by African-Americans and those employed by whites” (p. 46).

Getting to the Research

When your goal is to understand the sense making and identity formation of a group from their own perspective, you must gain access to the lives and sense making moments of that group. To find out how poor, urban, minority tweens see themselves using consumer culture to construct their identities, I use auto/ethnographic methods, including interviewing and participant observation, in a research environment well-known to the tweens I wish to study—school. To examine as fully as possible how I came to understand this research project, I will discuss the questions I had coming into the work, the research site, and auto/ethnography.

Research Questions

I engaged this work in order to answer a very important question for the citizens of consumer culture generally. How does consumer culture factor into understandings of identity for both self and others? I consider these questions by working with poor, minority, urban tweens because they are the most demonized consumer group in the U.S. (see Chin, 2001; Kotlowitz, 1999, 2000; Nightingale, 1993), and therefore a group on the margins, or a “strategically situated culture” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988). These demonized images create a sense of alienation and despair in those they target (Chin 1993, 2001; Kotlowitz 1999, 2000; MacLeod 1987; Nightingale, 1993). Attending to poor, urban, minority tweens own perceptions and meaning making systems allows the perpetuation of a fuller and more positive popular image among U.S. popular culture and major decision makers.

By exploring the identity constructions of this consumer group, we gain insight into the ways U.S. consumers utilize and understand the roles of consumer goods and culture. Through the creation of a hedonistic other, the “mainstream” may continue their consumer behaviors with little, if any, self-reflection or critique. As Neumann (1996) notes when discussing historical trends in ethnography that create an exotic other, “The Other, as symbol of elsewhere, of exoticism, has been a mediating vehicle that continually provided an inverse image of home, place, self, and power” (p. 175). By creating an image of poor, minority, urban tweens as an exotic and dangerous other, the

larger structures of consumer culture need not be questioned and neither must the behavior of those who hold more power in society.

Neumann (1996) writes, “The particular experiences of individuals in tension with dominant expressions of discursive power” lead to deeper understandings of those systems of power. This on-the-ground, in-the-self approach offers a chance to remove the other from the realm of the exotic and see them as a part of the larger culture. A field site where consumer life is happening and meaning is negotiated and made for poor, minority, urban tweens (a group often exoticized rather than seen as a part of the larger society) is imperative to this project.

Field Location

Finding a site where tweens interact, are comfortable, and live out a significant aspect of their lives is essential to creating a fuller picture of their consumer understandings and makes an extended-day school an ideal choice. I initially thought schools were out of the question given the difficulty in gaining access. Also, as with much of the country, Florida school systems have slashed extracurriculars and recess time due to budget cuts and a focus on standardized testing. Given these constraints, I wasn't convinced that, even if I could gain physical access, a school setting would offer the opportunity to talk to and observe children. Private schools didn't occur to me because I wanted to speak with those without the financial resources I assumed were necessary to attend a school that requires tuition. Also, despite the positive aspects of interacting with children in a school environment, it also constrains ethnographic inquiry by engaging participants in a hierarchically situated, age-segregated institution (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Although such constraints don't prohibit research, they must be considered as an important influence on the observations. Despite the potential drawbacks of a school and my fear I would not be able to access an institutional setting which would meet my needs, I happened upon Scholastic Middle,¹² when searching a volunteer website.

Access to tweens in an atmosphere where they were living their daily lives without being research subjects was not my only concern. I entered this process knowing

¹² The name of the school has been changed to protect the anonymity of the organization, its staff, and students.

that I wanted to give back to the community I studied. By volunteering, I would be helping not only the organization that gave me access, but also the tweens I observed and interviewed. I did not want to interact, or not interact as the case may be, in the field primarily as a researcher. First and foremost, I wanted to be a useful part of a community.

As I read about Scholastic Middle, I hoped I had found an ideal research site. Along with basic information regarding the school's mission to give financially disadvantaged students the opportunity to receive a fully funded college preparatory education, I learned that the school was one of several sites where undergraduate federal work-study students can complete their hours. The school's participation in the federal work-study program let me know that they had the ability (and desire) to train those who work part-time and who were not otherwise trained to work in education.¹³ This information led me to believe they might be interested in volunteers as well. I sent the Scholastic Middle volunteer coordinator an email asking about the availability of volunteer opportunities. Her response was welcoming and we set an appointment for me to tour the school and fill out a volunteer application.

Scholastic Middle is based on three pillars of education—summer programs, middle school education, and graduate support. Following this model,¹⁴ Scholastic Middle provides extended day, extended year education for middle school students and graduate support through high school and college. Students attend school for up to eleven hours a day, six days a week, throughout the school year. They also attend a four-week summer session. All students who graduate from the eighth grade at Scholastic Middle are given help from the graduate support staff in applying to and funding applications to elite high schools and later colleges around the country. The staff is committed to procuring scholarships and other funding for students. For high school, students attend some of the most prestigious boarding schools in the country, and those who stay in the area attend both private institutions and magnet programs. In addition to help in applying to programs, students receive funds and assistance to travel to and from school (both high schools and colleges) on semester breaks. For instance, the graduate coordinator drove

¹³ Federal work study offers students part-time positions (Federal Work Study Program, 2008).

¹⁴ There are several schools in the U.S. that use this same model of education.

two students who graduated in 2007 and went to boarding high schools in Tennessee and Virginia to their schools. The graduate coordinator also frequently visits local students at school and home and keeps in touch via phone and email with those out of the area.

Scholastic Middle is the second of its kind in the region and the second school funded by the Scholastic Middle Foundation, Inc., which was founded in 1996.¹⁵ A local couple established the Foundation. After having trouble finding qualified employees for their various companies, they began to look into the local school system and found that dropout rates for black youth, especially black, male youth were staggering. In 1995, less than 37 percent of students in the neighborhood where the first Scholastic Middle Center is located graduated from high school. During this time, they read about the three-pillars of education model and decided to create a school based on this process. The first campus opened in 1997, with a second opening in 2003. The mission of Scholastic Middle is to take students who demonstrate academic potential and determination and provide them the education and support to meet that potential. In neighborhoods with high school graduation rates of less than 50 percent, Scholastic Middle boasts that 95 percent of its graduates are participating in high school, college, and careers.

The school is funded through private donors and PRIDE, the Florida school voucher program. Yearly tuition for each student is \$13,500. Corporate sponsors, private donors, and the \$3000 state-sponsored PRIDE scholarships (for those who qualify) fund student scholarships. Students buy their own uniforms and pay \$15 in monthly activity fees; otherwise, their education is free.

The school requires students' families to volunteer up to 50 hours annually to the school. Family members volunteer to monitor study hall, assist in classrooms and extracurriculars, serve lunch, do office work, and offer support at events like family picnics, plays, graduation, and field trips. Driving to events and field trips and donating food for social gatherings also earns volunteer hours. Any family member can contribute to the volunteer hours for a student. Volunteer hours and activity fees are set per family, not per student. Between family and community volunteers, Scholastic Middle utilizes

¹⁵ Background information on Scholastic Middle and the Scholastic Middle Foundation is taken from the school's website and has not been cited to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of Scholastic Middle's students, staff, and administrators.

over 7,000 hours per year of volunteer service. Although volunteers supplement the school's staff, they are not involved in delivering instruction.

Scholastic Middle's student population is currently 100 percent minority, although financial status, not race or ethnicity, is the requirement for admission. It is a unique atmosphere in that not only are students admitted based on their scholarly aptitudes and attitudes (based on entrance tests and interviews) and financial disadvantages (determined by eligibility for the National School Lunch Program), but they also attend school for up to eleven hours each school day, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. This time covers breakfast, morning convocation, academic classes, recess, extracurricular activities, and study hall. Class size ranges from nine to seventeen students.

Scholastic Middle is much smaller than other schools in the county with an enrollment of approximately 115 students. The average for middle schools in the county (this includes schools in wealthy suburban areas) ranges from 332 students to 493 students (Hillsborough County Public Schools, 2009). The student-to-teacher ratio is 8: 1 at Scholastic Middle and between 13-36 students per teacher at Hillsborough County middle schools¹⁶ (Public School Review, 2009).

Students attend their academic classes and study hall in a single-sex environment. However, the boys and girls attend lunch, recess, extracurriculars, and some field trips together. Each grade attends at least one mandatory Saturday field trip per month.

In addition to the regular school year, students attend a four-week summer session consisting of both academic classes and extracurricular activities. This summer session supplements the school year for all students and serves as the final step of the admissions process for fifth and sixth grade students. For the summer session, the school invites up to 30 fifth graders and 30 sixth graders into each boys and girls class; only 15-17 of these students are admitted per class for the following school year. Students in the seventh and eighth grades must be continuing students. Because of this system, the school has time to develop students' academic abilities and abilities developed through extracurriculars like

¹⁶ These are numbers for schools not designated as alternative or special education institutions. The student-to-teacher ratios for special education schools were generally lower while the some alternative schools were lower and others had student-to-teacher ratios as high as 99 students to one teacher.

chess and karate. Because new students are not admitted past the sixth grade, the seventh and eighth grade classes are very small. Even if students leave the school, incoming students do not fill their places.

Although only the best students who apply in fifth and sixth grades are admitted, these students are often below grade level and usually have little if any experience with extracurricular school activities such as band, karate, chess, intramural sports, dance, drama, art, yoga, fitness and health, girl scouts, gardening, and sewing, among others. According to the school's website, by the time students leave Scholastic Middle following eighth grade, they are often at an 11th to 12th grade level in their work and have experienced and excelled in several interest-based activities.

The environment at Scholastic Middle offered a wonderful field location for study. It presented an intelligent and vivacious group of tweens to work with and a supportive environment in which to do research. I was allowed to set my own volunteering schedule and was often sent to more interactive classes (such as writing and drama where more open interactions take place) because the volunteer coordinator thought I might like a certain group or project. Through my volunteer work, I was able to help students with their homework, assist in staging plays, teach a week-long creative drama course during a summer session, assist in various classrooms (English, history, writing, and drama), teach yoga during the extracurricular period, and attend field trips. This extensive participation in school activities allowed me to build relationships with the students that were personally fulfilling and professionally promising.

As I had fun and felt as if I was giving back to the school and tweens, I was also learning about them. Interactions that were at once enjoyable and immediately useful to the learning outcomes of the students were also the stuff of analysis. These interactions were the basis for the ethnography I completed. For me, autoethnography and ethnography are hopelessly (and hopefully) tangled together, but I will attempt to untangle them for the sake of clarity. I will begin with ethnography.

Ethnography

Although neat categorizations of what ethnography is or does are hard to come by given the broad and diverse fields that utilize the method (see Atkinson, Coffey,

Delamont, Lofland & Lofland, 2001), there are a few generally understood suppositions regarding ethnography. The following section details the methodological grounding for my research through a brief overview of ethnographic methods, discusses the usefulness of ethnographic methods for studies of children, and explains critical ethnography.

Ethnography as Method

Ethnographic methods are qualitative, contextual, situated, interpretive, descriptive, holistic, and empirical and are utilized in places where people live and interact in their daily lives. Ethnography is both the process of closely observing those in the field site and writing up or performing accounts of this site through the use of descriptive detail (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Conquergood, 1991; Goffman, 1989; Goodall, 2000; MacDonald, 2001; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Rock, 2001; Van Maanen, 1988).

Ethnography allows me to attempt to understand social interaction by observing and participating in it. It requires a field site where I can operate as “stranger and friend” (Powdermaker, 1966 as cited in Rock, 2001, p. 32). Participant observers try to engage with people and practices in the field in both body and mind. It is through this type of engagement that one can come to an approximate understanding of what social actors in the scene are doing and why. As a participant observer, I am both a part of the scene, in my case a volunteer at a school, and an observer of the scene. I am always operating with a second agenda—research—that others in the field presumably do not share. As a member of the scene, I am constantly negotiating the role expectations of those in the scene (i.e., administrators, teachers, and students) and the needs of my research.

In the end, ethnography presents only a slice of life, a limited view interpretation of what those in the field know. I engage in the field as a participant in the hopes that I will become empathetic enough (Goffman, 1989) to “replicate some of the subjective knowledge” (Rock, 2001, p. 32) of those with whom I’m interacting. Ethnography is the “living in another’s shoes” approach, but one that ethnographers do knowing that the shoes are always borrowed and do not quite fit. This problem of fit occurs even when the ethnographer is a legitimate member of a group, because she is a researcher and, as

Goffman said, “a fink” (1989, p. 125). In other words, ethnography is partial, perspectival, and always in process.

What we can say or know as a result of ethnographic work is always provisional. It is not generalizable but specific, and there are limits to what can be known. As Rock (2001) writes,

Knowledge is necessarily provisional, bound temporally and contextually, shaped both by the particular purposes and experiences of the observer, and by the encounters which he or she had with particular others in the field. It can lead to only the most modest extrapolation of forms, offered often without the assurance that the ‘same’ forms might not be combined in quite unexpected ways elsewhere. (p. 31)

Further, ethnography is not a “repeatable” model of research. According to Tedlock (2000), “it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives” (p. 455).

Despite ethnography’s acknowledged provisionality, ethnographers do everything ethically permissible to gain a clear perspective on the lives of the social actors they study. To this end, participant observation is often supplemented with other methods including interviewing. Interviews range from formal, structured appointments to conversations held during the events of a day in the field. Most often in ethnographic work, interviews happen in conjunction with observation, not as a substitute. Sherman Heyl (2001) asserts that “ethnographic interviewing,” can only take place in work where,

Researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds. (p. 369)

This study adheres to Sherman Heyl’s recommendation. I began interviewing students ten months after my entrance into the field. These interviews happened within

and through personal relationships with the participants.¹⁷ They were talking to me as someone they knew, not an outside researcher, and I was interacting with them as individuals with a known personality and past, not simply as participants. I completed a total of 25 interviews, which broke down by grade and gender as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Interviewee Breakdown by Grade and Gender

Sex	Grade				Totals
	fifth	sixth	seventh	eighth	
Girls	3	1	1	9	14
Boys	4	1	2	4	11
Totals	7	2	3	13	25

Interviews with the tweens allowed a chance to “check up” on my interpretations of the interactions I observed and to gain new insights that had not presented themselves in everyday interaction. Also, this was a time to remind students that I was a researcher and allow them to opt out of participating in my study. Through both interviews and observation with these students, I worked to understand their views regarding consumer culture as completely as possible.

To ensure confidentiality of content, I conducted interviews lasting from 25 to 55 minutes in a private room within the school. I sent informed consent forms to every parent in the school via U.S. mail, and students returned them to the school office. I interviewed all students whose parents consented. In addition, students were also asked for verbal assent¹⁸ at the beginning of each interview.

¹⁷ As Sherman Heyl (2001) suggests, interviews were open enough to explore the research content, rather than fully dictate it, with the participant and therefore did not follow a strict set of questions. However, Appendix A lists the questions most commonly asked.

¹⁸ Minors are not legally capable of giving consent, only assent, to research procedures. This assent, either verbal or written, confirms that they are willing participants in the research. I asked for assent in conjunction with requesting written consent from guardians. Assent in this study was verbal as written assent would have been the only document directly linking the tween with the research.

However specific and provisional the nature of the knowledge claims generated through ethnography, this method also affords a deep view of the intricacies of social life and how such intricacies are enacted and understood by actors. A deep view is possible because ethnographers pay attention to the situated knowledge of actors in the scene. In other words, the job of the ethnographer is to learn about and attempt to understand the everyday lives of the actors, not just their actions but their reasons and understandings of how and why they act. As Rock (2001) says, “The ethnographer will seek to understand and reproduce the logic-in-use of the subjects on the social scene because *that* is the material of social life and of sociology, the motive power that drives social action” (p. 31).

Ethnography can be used reflexively and flexibly, enabling a deeper view of social life. For Eder and Corsaro (1999) the “dialectical or feedback” (p. 524) nature of ethnography is inherent to its entire process, from question formulation to data collection to data analysis and theory generation. Ethnography is a method that allows for, and demands willingness toward, change and negotiation throughout the process. One enters the field, as best she can, without expectations of findings. This allows the researcher to reflect on what has been found or not found and alter the research methods and interpretations accordingly. As the research progresses, the researcher can change strategies depending on what is called for by participants or situations. This flexibility comes about from both a lack of presuppositions (so much as is possible) on the part of the researcher and a understanding that participants have knowledge and understanding of their own lives that the researchers does not.

Ethnography requires researchers make a commitment to attending to life in the places where it is lived with a minimum of presupposition, be open to learn from participants and to participate in their lives, and cultivate the ability to respond to new information with flexibility and reflexivity. These qualities are suited not only to the study of social life but also offer particular relevance and insight into the lives of children.

*Ethnography and Children*¹⁹

Although any method might be applied to the study of youth, the works that gain the most insight into their meaning-making systems, both for marketers and other researchers, focus on engaging children in their own homes, recreational, and school environments (see Chin, 2001; Eder & Corsaro, 1999; Nightingale, 1993; Pugh, 2004; Schor, 2004; Stack, 2001; Wells, 2002). Understandably, market research with children of all ages is extensive given the significant amount of money spent by and for them—\$20 billion spent by those 8 to 12-years-old and \$150 billion of their parents spending being influenced by them (Lagorio, 2007; see Schor, 2004). Ethnography affords insight into children's lives by situating children as knowing social actors, something for which more positivist methods, by their nature as researcher-determined, cannot adequately account. A. James (2001) states,

Ethnography allows children to be seen as competent informants about and interpreters of their own lives and of the lives of others and is an approach to childhood research that can employ children's own accounts centrally within the analysis. Thus it is that contemporary social scientific accounts of children's social worlds are able to shed new light on many different aspects of children's lives through the presentation of those lives from the children's own perspectives. (p. 250)

Seeing children as socially active participants is essential to trying to understand how they make decisions and come to form understandings of themselves (Eder & Corsaro, 1999). For Eder and Corsaro, ethnography offers three features that are especially important for the study of children: it is sustained and engaged, microscopic and holistic, and flexible and self-corrective. First, only by observing and attending to children's lives over an extended time and in a way that asks the researcher to engage the children (in action and/or through empathetic observation) are children understood as social actors and attended to as such. Ethnography is both microscopic and holistic in that it attends to tiny moments of life in great detail while contextualizing those moments in larger systems. Third, ethnography is flexible and self-corrective. One works to enter the

¹⁹ The classification of "children" for research purposes can indicate any person or group under the age of 18.

field with few preconceptions, and no preconception held so tightly that one cannot disregard or alter it based on what is learned in the field. No one can enter a realm of social life without some ideological framework; however the ethnographic researcher looks for “a balance between structure, disciplined by the research problem, and flexibility, disciplined by the goal of understanding the informants point of view” (Miller & Sperry, 1987, p. 4 as cited in Eder & Corsaro, 1999, p. 525).

So in addition to its usefulness in studying social life in general, ethnography is perhaps the only method that allows “a view of children as competent interpreters of the social world” (A. James, 2001, p. 246), which is key to understanding how they use consumer culture to formulate their identities. Ethnographic work with poor, minority, urban tweens also offers the opportunity for gaining critical insight into consumer culture at large, and therefore offers the opportunity to pursue a critical ethnography.

Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography fuses a description of a social scene and actors with an interrogation of systems of power and oppression. It is concerned with “the construction of consent and the naturalization of inequities” (Lather, 2001, p. 479). I am interested in exploring the ways that poor, minority, urban tweens construct their identities in relation to consumer culture. The dominant culture sees these tweens’ motives for consumption as shallow, self-serving, and hedonistic. There is a “naturalization of inequities” (Lather, 2001, p. 479) in this understanding in that it portrays these tweens in ways that do not account for issues of access, cultural value systems, or a history of race-based economic oppression. These portrayals provide the underlying justifications for the continuation of the denial of equality. These portrayals are not based on lived realities and understandings of poor, minority, urban tweens. Because of this, they are sensationalized and unfairly critiqued and ridiculed in mainstream media and society. They are viewed as brand-obsessed, “combat consumers” (Chin, 2001), who are willing to trade away their futures (and those of others) through violence and reliance on the welfare system to fulfill their consumerist desires. These perspectives are in conflict with the realities of their lives as severely constrained by age, race, and class. Understanding both how these tweens create identity and social connection with such limited means and how they

operate in a larger culture that judges them so harshly can offer insight, and perhaps alternatives, to all those who negotiate identity in a consumer culture. Further, creating a more accurate, nuanced, critical, and fair understanding of this group's use of consumer culture is important for the lives of poor, minority, urban tweens because it allows for more positive and less psychologically and materially damaging images.

More accurate portrayals of this group are also important for other U.S. consumer groups. As Marcus and Fischer (1986) put it, "The challenge of serious cultural criticism is to bring the insights gained on the periphery back to the center to raise havoc with our settled ways of thinking and conceptualization" (138). My hope is that this work may be used as an impetus for the white middle and upper classes to take into account hedonistic, selfish, and superficial aspects of their own consumption.

In addition to the choice of a research site and group, an understanding of the position of the researcher is essential to critical ethnography. The "crisis of representation" (see Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Conquergood, 1991; Denzin, 1997; Marcus & Fischer, 1986) has played its part in forming the critical ethnographic genre. The researcher is not an unbiased observer of cultural Others. She is a real person in history with a past and agenda. This understanding of the researcher as a real person situated in the world "requires the cultural critic to be self-critical of the origins of his own ideas and arguments, while delivering interpretations of life in a society of which he, like his subjects, is a full member" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p.115). One way to situate myself, to be, in short, reflexive, or "self-critical" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986, p. 115), is to use autoethnographic elements in the research and writing processes.

Autoethnography

The need for critical ethnography came about partially from of the crisis of representation. Ethnography had to ask: Who has the ability or right to speak and for whom? Or, at the very least, who is the person speaking? Any critical ethnography requires reflexive elements to help answer these questions. Autoethnography is one way to address issues of reflexivity. However, even as scholars call for intersubjective work (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Anderson, 2006; Conquergood, 1991; Ellis & Bochner,

2000; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Neumann, 1996) they don't necessarily use the term autoethnography.

For Anderson (2006), Conquergood (1991), and Marcus and Fischer (1986), the self-critical and reflexive researcher is necessary, both in the field and in the text, to any well-rounded ethnographic work. Spry (2001) calls autoethnography “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (p. 710). Others utilize autoethnography as the ethnography of self where the researcher is both researcher and researched and becomes one's own subject (Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

Autoethnography utilizes many of the same descriptive methods and contextualizing tools of ethnography but with one's self as an integral part of the research, one of the research participants, rather than solely on an outside subject or group of subjects. Holman Jones (2005) utilizes autoethnography, particularly through a performance lens, as a “critical intervention in social, political, and cultural life” (p. 763) that addresses the “triple crisis” (p. 766) of representation, legitimation, and praxis that faces the human disciplines (see also Denzin, 1997). For my study, autoethnography allows me to interrogate my own role in the research setting and agenda while allowing the reader to do the same.

For many autoethnography is a way to make not only one's voice and perspective heard, but also to make the voices and perspectives of the groups that one belongs to heard more holistically and intimately, rather than as filtered through the voices and interests of outside researchers. For Neumann (1996), “One value of autoethnographic texts is that they democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of discursive power” (p. 189).

I use autoethnography in both ways listed above—to position the researcher in the field and offer a context for study. First, it locates the researcher in the field with participants. Through the use of autoethnographic reflection regarding my experiences of poverty and time in the field, my work will remain clearly one interpretation, one construction, my situated understanding of myself and participants in interaction, rather

than a claim to some ultimate truth. I am not those I have studied and cannot claim this work as any such truth.

My power position(s) (adult, highly educated, white, seemingly middle-class) all factor into my experience of these individuals' lives. For Eder and Corsaro (1999), the transparency of the investigator's role in the scene is especially important with work involving youth:

Regardless of one's position on the degree and nature of participation, documentation of entry, acceptance, and participation is imperative in ethnographic studies of children and youth for several reasons. Most obviously, such documentation allows for estimates of possible disruptive effects of the research process on the normal flow of cultural routines and practices. Second (and more subtly but just as important), because entry, acceptance, and participation are processes with developmental histories, their documentation provides insights to productive and reproductive processes in children's worlds. (Eder & Corsaro, 1999, p. 523)

When the researcher removes herself from the writing, there is a false sense of objectivity and an important lens by which readers can interpret is omitted. It is likely that those who read my work will be more similar to me than to those I study. By not showing my struggles in understanding these tweens, my readers will not have access to how these moments, events, and places felt to me.

This work is filtered through my researcher identity, and it is filtered through my larger sense of self, my larger consumer identity. It is in this sense that this work is self-critically autoethnographic in the second, researcher as subject, sense mentioned above. It is a story of "strategically-situated" (Van Maanen, 1988) others, but as a personal story, it also serves as "one path through a shifting, transforming, and disappearing cultural landscape" (Neumann, 1996, p. 183). I come to this work because I feel camaraderie with these tweens. I try to learn their stories and interpretations because I see them being discounted in much the same ways I felt (and feel) my own experiences discounted. We have a common experience of being poor in a consumption-driven culture. I was a tween of a different generation, of a different race, and in a rural rather than urban setting,

however, there are interesting parallels (and stark differences) between these adolescents' stories and my own. I am shocked, elated, saddened, confused, amused, and immensely pleased by their interactions and answers to my questions. I am not neutral and I don't have all the answers. I am not the omniscient narrator of their stories. I hope to offer a "secondary, mediated knowledge that may be useful" (Rock, 2001, p. 31).

Through reflexive, auto/ethnographic practice, I hope to guide you through my interpretations of the scene and participants while allowing access to the moments in my life and factors of my identity that initially drew me to this work and offer some of the lenses by which I interpret what I see. However, what and how I see and understand the scene aren't the only factors influencing this research. My identity as a participant in the field, both as a volunteer at the school and as someone the tweens were willing to talk to, is central to my interpretations of the consumer identities of these participants. This identity will be taken up in Chapter 3, "The Old, Rich, White Lady': A 28-Year-Old Graduate Student Does Fieldwork."

Chapter 3

“The Old, Rich, White Lady”: A 28-Year-Old Graduate Student Does Fieldwork

Damn it, Juliet!

“Grab him!” I yell out to the student playing Juliet. “You are thinking, ‘Just kiss me, damn it!’” As soon as the words come out of my mouth, we all freeze. In this split second, I hope against hope they didn’t notice, even as I know that’s insane. At the same time, they replay the word “damn” over and over in their heads to make sure I really said it. The students crack up with the joy that comes about only when someone in authority completely messes up. Juliet falls to the floor with glee. Romeo and the set crew are forced to lean on each other for support as they laugh.

After several seconds of frozen horror, all I can do is laugh with them. I ignore the visions of parents calling the school the next morning to complain about the foul-mouthed volunteer in play rehearsal. I toy with the idea of swearing them to secrecy, but there is no better way to make sure they tell this story at home. I give up and laugh until tears escape from the corners of my eyes.

I confess my sin to the drama teacher, who put me in charge of the rehearsal for the Shakespeare spoof “Drop Dead, Juliet.” She laughs it off. It becomes another incident in the “I didn’t read about that in my methods course” category of my research.

An Adult Amongst Tweens

Like most adults, I imagine myself younger and cooler than I actually am, something especially questionable when considered in relationship to urban, minority tweens. Middle schoolers will not let you harbor this illusion for long. I was quickly forced to leave behind visions of myself as a young, vivacious, edgy, unique member of a transitional working/middle-class as I became the rich, old, white lady who wouldn’t tell on you. I was granted entry into the lives of the tweens as this person. In this chapter, I’ll first discuss my entry into the school. Second, I’ll detail aspects of how I interacted with

different groups of tweens at school. Finally, I'll offer some reflections on my researcher positionality and the ethical implications of becoming what I refer to as a "liminal adult."

Formal and Informal Entry

I entered Scholastic Middle in various official and unofficial ways. I had certain expectations about the most fruitful approaches to go about doing my research. As the work unfolded, my researcher status was rarely formally disclosed and there were many more groups to informally tell about my researcher status than I had anticipated.

I volunteered for the Spring 2007 semester before officially requesting permission to do my research, although I had disclosed my desire to eventually do research when I initially met with the volunteer coordinator. My official acceptance into the school as a researcher came in a formal letter submitted to the Institutional Review Board by the head of school in the Summer of 2007. However, unofficial acceptance as a researcher came in sporadic moments throughout my tenure with various groups in the school.

Informally, I disclosed my research status on the first day I visited the campus until more than a year after my fieldwork was completed when I had become simply another volunteer. These informal disclosures came in many different forms with the different groups at the school.

Once Mr. Tejera, the head of school, officially sanctioned my role as a researcher, it was simply accepted by everyone else. The teachers talked to me about my research only in passing. Once I proved myself valuable as a volunteer; that was the role I was assigned in the school.

The first extensive conversation I had with students about being a researcher came when monitoring study hall with the eighth grade girls. They asked me why I was volunteering and if I was in college. The students were used to volunteers either coming from the community (and often being retired or semi-retired) or being high school or college age. Luckily for my self-esteem, they identified me as the latter. The girls wanted to know if I was volunteering "for hours." I took this to mean that they thought I might be required to volunteer a certain number of hours for a class or as a requirement for my degree. They have had other volunteers taking service-learning courses and education majors required to spend a certain amount of time at schools to complete their degrees.

The conversation progressed. “Well, I am in school, but I’m a graduate student.” Puzzled looks all around. “Basically, I’ve been in college for nine years.” Appalled looks all around. “When you first go to school you get one degree and then you can get more after that.”

Jacynth replies with eyebrows raised, this act questioning my sanity, “You crazy. I can’t be in school that long. One degree is enough.”

The other girls nod along with her, and I laugh saying, “It is a little nuts, but I don’t have to volunteer to get my degree. I’m volunteering so I can learn about you.” I can tell they’re interested, so I continue. “I came here because I want to know how you feel about consumer culture.”

This time Ianna jumps in, “You mean what we buy?”

“Yeah, but not just what you buy. What you like is also important. Like, what kind of music, what celebrities, what you do in your free time.”

Cala interrupts, “So, our personal styles?” I nod, excited that she gets it, and Cala comments with a smile, “That’s cool, I like that.”

Cala is cut off by a snort from the other side of the room. Tahira says, “Well, you can’t study that here, because they don’t let us do anything.” She pulls on her shirt to indicate her uniform.”

I say, “It seems like ya’ll do a pretty good job showing that you’re unique, that you’re individuals. You all have different hairstyles, jewelry, and shoes.²⁰ I think you all look very different from one another.”

They agree, proud that I noticed their attempts at making a personal style statement despite the uniform constraints. However, they’re reticent to give up their stand on the limitations on personal style at Scholastic Middle, Tahira insists, “We’re kept from doing what we want.”

This tension between creativity and control is a theme that came up often at Scholastic Middle. The students hated their uniforms and considered them a cruel form of control over their bodies and self-expression. This tension offered a key source of insight

²⁰ There are strict dress code rules regarding shoes and jewelry (discussed in Chapter 8). However, the students are very creative in their bending and breaking of those rules.

into political resistance as enacted through consumer culture, which I discuss in Chapter 8.

The most fruitful spaces for interacting with the tweens regarding my research were moments stolen away from structured time in their school day. For example, while they were playing chess, drawing, or completing other class projects that allowed for talking, or once class tasks were completed. These were liminal spaces (Turner, 1969, 1987, 2001) in which students were not fully constrained by the rules of the classroom or able to take advantage of the level of freedom allowed by recess, lunch, or after-school time.

This liminality was important to the types of conversations I had with the tweens not only because it gave me a chance to be welcomed into the conversation, but also because it was a time when they enjoyed the opportunity to talk about my research topic. Often they were already talking about aspects of consumer culture. Having three or four students at a table together was the perfect incentive for them to begin a conversation about music or what they might wear to an upcoming event. These are not moments that I anticipated being integral to the research process when I designed the study. I had instead thought that lunch and recess would be more fruitful, however during these times they were more interested in each other than me. When to talk to the tweens was not my only miscalculation. Interacting at the school was another realm where my reading about fieldwork wasn't predictive of what would happen.

Interactions at School

Interacting at the school turned out different than I envisioned. First, role conflicts between my value to the faculty and administrators and gaining the trust and interest of the students abounded. Second, there were several unexpected ways to bond with the students. Finally, the tweens desire to be interviewed was unexpected and helpful.

Volunteer vs. Friend

When designing my research, I underestimated the role conflicts I would feel when dealing with the school staff and students. I also miscalculated the number of publics I would interact with (and perform for) over the course of my time at Scholastic Middle. On a daily basis, I interacted with administrators and teachers, AmeriCorps

teachers,²¹ parents, other volunteers, cleaning staff, community groups, board members, and other funding contributors. Many of these role conflicts came about because of my narrow, yet ambiguous, role of volunteer.

Much of my work as a volunteer was to help enforce school rules. Unfortunately, as one might expect, enforcing the rules is not the best way to get students to open up to you. Not only did I need the tweens willing to have me around, but I also needed them to want to participate in interviews. None of these things were possible without their goodwill and generosity of time and space. Therefore, while it was necessary for me to enforce the 20 rules of study hall if I wanted to the administration to continue to assign me there (where I had opportunity to talk with the students), I also needed to bend the rules if I wanted the students to engage with me. As a researcher, I worked to be a friend, while as a volunteer (and to maintain my access to the site as a researcher) I was compelled to enforce the rules. I often felt guilty for letting them talk (being a good researcher) or trying to keep them on track (being a good volunteer).

Negotiating these conflicting roles led to some interesting and unexpected ways to bond with the students. Given that there was no tension-free role in the structure of the school for me to inhabit, I was creative in my dealings with both the students and the faculty. I did my best to perform volunteer to their expectations, while subtly communicating my alignment with the students to diminish my authority role. Two ways that I did this were through the use of the universal “we” and the creation of the “liminal” adult.

Universal “We”

The use of the universal “we” was my most important tool in staying on the good side of faculty and students. I kept the students somewhat quiet and on task as I supervised them during classes, extracurricular activities, and study hall, saying things like, “We’d better get moving,” or “Come on ya’ll, we’ll get in trouble if we don’t get to work.” I repeatedly asked them to please be quiet, or get in line, or stop rough housing, or put away the magazines, or open up their books, or finish their assignments, or focus on

²¹ AmeriCorps teachers were distinct from the other faculty in their youth and attitudes, and were generally the only people required to attend the entire eleven-hour school day besides the students.

their work so that “we don’t all get in trouble.” I was moderately to mostly effective with this tactic. However Kaia, one of the eighth grade girls, once asked me in a sarcastic tone, “What trouble you gonna get in?” I told her the administration wouldn’t let me work with her class anymore. She didn’t seem fully convinced by my answer, so it was fortunate that just a couple of days later I got called into the head of school’s office (actually the volunteer coordinator’s office) for misbehaving.

It happened in the eighth grade girls’ chess class. Mr. Shah (an AmeriCorps teacher who had long ago lost all semblance of discipline in his classroom) was teaching. In this particular class, he had set the girls up into teams of two, with two teams at each table. He then moved from group to group to play against them. This left a lot of downtime, since he had to play six different teams. It didn’t take the girls long to choose a move because they were quite proficient at chess. They talked while he moved around the room, and as this particular group of girls very much likes to do, they also got quite loud. Mr. Shah tried to calm them down several times with varying levels of success. For my part, I encouraged the four girls at my table to keep their voices down with my customary, “We’d better be quiet.” Also, because I was in the process of learning to play chess during my time at Scholastic Middle, I tried to keep them focused by asking them questions about the game.

However, when the topic of shopping came up I couldn’t help but engage them in further conversation. We began to discuss shopping at Wal-mart. Ianna mentioned going to Wal-mart and buying something. She then turned to me and said, “But you don’t shop at Wal-mart, right?” which is something we’d spoken about in a study hall session a couple of weeks before. Cala, who hadn’t been a part of these earlier conversations, was shocked, “What!?” she said incredulously.

“Well, Wal-mart just makes me angry. It’s crowded, huge, and often a mess. I can’t find anything, and there isn’t usually anyone around to help you.”

Ianna and Cala nod along with this. “It is hard when you want to find something specific,” Cala acknowledges.

“And on Saturdays it is hard to get around,” adds Ianna. “But is that really that big a deal?” she asks me, “After all, it’s cheaper.”

“I know it’s cheaper, and if I had a lot of people to buy for, I might shop there,” I acknowledge. “However, it’s not just the inconvenience. I think a lot of their practices aren’t very good for society as a whole. They won’t allow their employees to unionize, they have some bad environmental practices . . .”

Cala interrupts, “Yeah, we read something about that in science class. Them building on a wetland or something.” I nod.

“Yeah, they do some bad stuff, but I don’t think I’ll stop shopping there,” Ianna interjects.

“Me neither,” says Cala. “It’s really convenient, especially for my mom. And saving money is important to us.”

“And, I like shopping there ‘cause I can go look around while my mom grocery shops. I find a lot of cute stuff that way,” Ianna says with a sense of finality. I nod, showing that I see the logic of their arguments.

From Wal-mart, the conversation turns to the show “Gossip Girl,” a television show about rich Manhattan teens on the CW network. In this week’s show, one of the male leads, Chuck Bass, bought a Burlesque Club where one of the female leads, Blair Waldorf, winds up dancing on a dare. Three of the girls at the table had seen the show and followed the series faithfully (as had I). After they recapped the episode, Ianna asked me what burlesque was. Although I realized the difficulties in answering this question given the sexuality inherent in burlesque, I forged ahead and tried to explain my limited understanding to them.

“I don’t know a lot about it, but it has French roots. It’s sensuous and often done in lingerie or topless. It’s sexual, but not exactly stripping.”

“But, what about . . .” as Ianna began to form her question amidst a flurry of excited chatter from Cala and Elois, Mr. Shah loudly says from the next table, “Be quiet now or the entire class will lose recess tomorrow.” This reprimand quiets the girls momentarily, and class is soon over.

This class was the last of the day and is followed by a break, during which students go to their homerooms to have a quick snack before beginning their chosen extracurricular activities. During this time I usually head to the office to wait and find out

where I am needed for the activities. I typically talk with students who come to the office to use the bathroom or whose parents might be picking them up early. I also talk with community members and groups who come in to lead extracurriculars.

During this time, Mr. Shah must have gone to speak to Sheila, the volunteer coordinator, about the incident in chess class. A few minutes into the break Sheila called me into her office. She kindly but firmly told me that my job in classes was to help the teacher keep order, and she'd heard there were some problems keeping the girls quiet in chess. There was no mention of what we were talking about so I assumed the only problem was the amount of talking. I agreed and apologized, knowing that despite the obvious flaw in the class planning that left the girls with so much free time, I had not done my best to keep things on track. I later apologized to Mr. Shah and all was well.

I attempted to avoid Mr. Shah's classes after this incident. If I didn't reprimand the students, Mr. Shah wasn't happy. If I reprimanded them, the students weren't happy. Working in this particular class dynamic did not allow for me to create a status different from the other adults and volunteers in the school, which was essential to my research.

Liminal Adult

My status as a researcher, not just a volunteer, also helped me to gain the students' trust. The commonly held ethnographic wisdom that blending into the research site is the best way to access information wasn't the case at Scholastic Middle. Because I came to the school with an interest in the students and framed my role as volunteer as a means to being with them, the students generally welcomed my presence. I was not there in any traditional adult role. In their minds, adults are largely there to control them, not engage them as compatriots and knowledgeable actors. I was a different kind of adult, a liminal adult.

In using the term liminal adult, I am playing on Victor Turner's (1969, 1987, 2001) concept of the liminal space. Liminal space, as I mentioned earlier, is space in which otherwise inappropriate societal performances may occur because they are in a liminal, neither here nor there and socially un- or less defined, space or time. My performance of being an adult was a liminal one. I was neither an adult within the traditional role boundaries of the school, nor was I a non-adult. To use Richard

Schechner's (1985) construction for performance, I was not me but not, not me. I stood in a different place in the us versus them dichotomy of students and adults. I was not faculty or administration; I was a volunteer, which holds a less powerful status in and of itself. However, I was further separated from administrators and faculty through my role as a researcher. To the students, I was there as a researcher interested in them, not primarily in their educations. This liminal adult is similar to Corsaro's (1997) "power, non participant status," Mayall's (2000) "atypical adult," and Mandell's (1991) "least adult" (all as cited in A. James, 2001) in that all take on a less power-oriented adult status to gain access to children's lives and talk.

One way I enacted the role of liminal adult was through treating the tweens like adults. A second way was to treat them like kids. These contradictory approaches meshed well in my role as a liminal adult. In both ways I treated them the opposite of how other adults in the school treated them.

First, a discussion of the ways I treated them as adults. I believe that one of my personal limitations for this type of work allowed me to gain their trust. As an adult, I know little about children and adolescents since I've not spent significant time around them since I was their age. Therefore, I did not know what their emotional and intellectual developmental level "should" be, and based on this, how I "should" be talking to them and treating them. Therefore, I treated them as adults. I took their explanations at face value and assumed that they knew what they needed to do in terms of their work and whether they needed to sharpen their pencils or go to the bathroom—all things many other adults in the school often questioned. I also answered their questions as fully and honestly as I could, even when they addressed subjects I wasn't sure how to discuss with them, like sex. My lack of canned answers and my willingness to tell them when I didn't know an answer helped with our rapport because we interacted as equals.

Second, I also treated the tweens like kids in instances in which the school administrators and teachers often demanded they behave like adults. When I felt I was able (i.e., when no other adults were around to expect me to control them more fully), I allowed them to behave immaturely. Adult expectations are set for the tweens in terms of a rigorous school day and intense academic and extracurricular requirements. I

acknowledged their immaturity by allowing them to talk and goof around in ways not considered appropriate by teachers and administrators. By treating them like kids (when others demanded they be adults) and treating them like adults (when others related to them as children), I was able to become a different kind of adult in their eyes—a liminal adult.

The tactics of oscillating between treating them as children and adults in an unexpected manner and the use of “we” when asking them to behave more appropriately allowed me to distance myself from the authority role of an adult volunteer. According to Eder and Corsaro (1999), this distancing is a key move toward gaining trust with children. They find the benefits of this practice are twofold: it reduces the power imbalance between the researcher and teenager, and it helps to gain access to less censored information. However, maintaining adult qualities can also facilitate children’s disclosure. Fine and Sandstrom (1988), argue adult qualities help the researcher to behave in “non-kid” ways such as asking uninformed or ignorant questions. I consistently took advantage of this perceived ignorance and asked questions for which they would have declared their peers profoundly stupid.

At no point was I not an adult, but through the use of “we” in reprimanding them, allowing them to break some minor rules, trying to treat them like adults and kids in unexpected ways, and framing my presence at the school as a means of being with them, I was able to find my way into a space and role that was not like any of the other adults in the school. Although the levels of disclosure on the part of the students did lead to some ethical dilemmas which will be discussed in the next section, the students’ willingness to disclose led to more interesting and nuanced research without making them feel overly exposed, particularly during interviews. Many of the students were interested in being interviewed. Most became more excited when they realized they would get to leave class to participate in them.

Interview Mania

In addition to the surprises in trying to negotiate volunteer and friend roles and unexpected avenues of bonding, the students’ desire to participate in interviews was a pleasant surprise to me. Some students lobbied their parents to sign the consent forms

because they wanted to be interviewed. This desire also led to conversations struck up for my benefit or me being called over to hear something someone said. For example, as I walked into drama class one afternoon, Brian asked me to come over to the table where he and Demaine were working. Brandon said, “Now, tell Miss Edgecomb,” after which Demaine retold his story about shopping with his mom at the mall. Like Nieuwenhuys (1994), I found that,

They did not think it awkward that I should show some interest in what they did. The thought that I was interviewing them to write down what they said excited them. Some became spontaneously my informants, reporting to me all the news that used to go from mouth to mouth. (p. 5-6 in A. James, 2001)

Other interesting interactions were the result of the interviews. At one point, I was taking a fifth grade girl out of her library class to do an interview, and another of the girls, Tina, also wanted to be interviewed. She let me know this by knocking on the window where I was interviewing Latoya indicating her chest with her thumb and mouthing next. I put up a finger to signal I’d talk to her in a minute and went on interviewing Latoya. When Latoya’s interview was over and we re-entered the library, the AmeriCorps teacher, Anne, informed me that Tina had been telling the other girls that I was “only interviewing the smart kids.” Luckily, Anne allowed me to take a few moments at the end of class to explain the reason that I wasn’t interviewing everyone: I needed consent forms from their parents. I explained that if they returned a signed consent form, I’d love to interview them. I then took forms from my bag and gave two copies to every fifth grade girl for whom I did not have a signed form. However, none of the forms were returned. One seventh grade boy updated me daily on the progress of his consent form in his mother’s pile of things to do, constantly predicting when I might receive it. Unfortunately, I never did. I sent out nearly 275 consent forms to 105 students. I received 25 completed forms and interviewed those students. This response rate provided ample interviews for my study, although I would have liked to hear what more of the students had to say.

Ultimately, the relationships I built with the tweens through my liminal adult status were incredibly fruitful, interesting, and personally fulfilling. The relationships

provided great insights into entering and interacting in the research site. However, like all relationships they also came with unexpected considerations. Some of these were ethical in nature.

Ethics

I had very few worries about entering the field other than how I would deal with the tweens on an interpersonal level. I thought these personal limitations would be difficult to deal with and to some extent they were. However, it was unexpected ethical issues that made me rush back to my methods books and curse their uselessness. Here I discuss personal factors that make this research project an interesting choice for me and issues of informed consent as a relational activity.

Everyday Me

I wrote earlier about the camaraderie I felt with the tweens because of our similar class backgrounds and struggles in a consumer society. However, just as important to the research are my everyday ways of going about the world—my personality—and the limitations it creates.

In addition to balancing the roles expected of me by the administrators and faculty with those of the students, I had to balance my identities as a researcher and a person. My personality is not suited to working with children. I like quiet—kids are loud, loud, loud. I like an adult style of efficiency and logic—kids don't generally operate on these same principles. When they do try to access the reasoning of the world, it is to question the "deep whys" for which I don't have reasonable answers. I'm also particular—some might even say bossy. I don't see myself, nor do most who know me, as having the patience or temperament to deal with kids. One clear limitation, my love and free use of bad language, is aptly demonstrated in the opening story of this chapter. I don't just like swearing; I relish it. Despite these limitations, I also remember the trials of being a kid, tween, and teen, and I empathize with the Scholastic Middle tweens. Ultimately, my lack of familiarity with kids allowed me to take on the role of a liminal adult. This role allowed me to deal with the ethical issues I now realize were inevitable and some of the most educational moments of the research.

Relational Informed Consent

There are ethical dilemmas that present themselves for any ethnographic researcher. There are also concerns for any adult interacting with children. Taking on a liminal adult role as a researcher means careful evaluation of situations for potential harm. I knew it wouldn't be advisable or possible to remove myself from all adult decision making responsibility in my research.

As such, I followed all Institutional Review Board requirements regarding written informed consent by parents and verbal assent by students. I provided copies of the informed consent documents for the parents to keep. Each time I sent out consent forms I included a letter explaining that one of the two forms provided was for the parent to keep. Parents often returned both forms. In these cases, I either mailed the forms back through the postal service or included them in the "Friday folders" each child was required to give to their parents every week. I explained the term confidentiality to the students when I asked them for interviews, when I began the interviews, and sometimes during particularly disclosive sections of the interview. In the end, what defined clearly ethical behavior was attending to the relationships between the tweens and me. I found that the tweens often considered confidentiality to extend beyond the interview and my research topic, and, conversely, that confidentiality regarding interview content was not always expected.

On several occasions students disclosed personal information to me that I do not believe they would have given to most adults at Scholastic Middle. This was evidenced in my conversations with the eighth grade girls, among whom I interviewed nine out of eleven students. Weeks after I had finished their interviews, I was in their study hall when they were talking about the romantic relationships of two of the girls (who were not in study hall during this conversation) with two of the eighth grade boys. The girls spoke quite adamantly and colorfully about the ways in which their classmates were behaving inappropriately by lying to meet their boyfriends and "doing things they don't need to be doing."

As this conversation went on, I was shocked. Although I had heard sex spoken about somewhat openly between the students and at least two teachers, I can't imagine

that this particular conversation is one they would have in front of many adults. Not only would they get their classmates into trouble with both the school and their parents, but their language and manner would also not have been considered appropriate. As one of them said, “She wants to be a ho, I’m not gonna stop her.” I unintentionally jerked my head up out of shock. While a couple of the girls momentarily looked worried, like they might have just gone too far, Tahira just laughed.

She said, “It’s just Miss Edgecomb. She’s not gonna tell.” I was struck by the possibility that they were still speaking under the umbrella of confidentiality. As a volunteer at the school, administrators expect me to report these things. However, the girls were right. I saw no immediate danger for any of them and so I did not tell anyone. Given my own memories of eighth grade, I know that being told they could not see these boys would make them all the more likely to continue. I also considered asking the girls to confirm my suspicions about their openness being related to previous promises of confidentiality, but I was distracted by their next comment.

Jacynth turns to me and says, “Well, what do you think about Ianna and Kabira? They doing bad?”

I paused, clearly thinking about the best answer, and then said, “You know you can’t tell people how to go about things. They’ll do what they want.” Jacynth and Tahira nod their heads sagely, and I continue doing my best not to sound like an after-school special. “I think that most women who regret having sex regret it because they think they had sex for the wrong reasons.”

Along with her vigorous head nodding, Jacynth says, “You know that’s right. Like just to get some boy to like you,” and all heads in the room nod along. At this point, the girls take over the conversation and the moment for me to ask whether confidentiality in the interviews is expanded to this space and conversation has passed. However, just as the moment for me to question confidentiality has evaporated, the girls also let the moment pass where they could confirm with me that I won’t tell anyone about our conversation. They are confident that I will not tell, and I won’t.

However, unlike the conversation with the eighth grade girls, when interviewing Reed, a seventh grade boy, I did feel the need to break confidentiality. Prior to

interviewing Reed, I had been lulled into a false sense of security regarding the types of narratives I would hear in the interviews. Initially, I imagined I might hear stories of abuse or just that students weren't very happy. However, in only two interviews did students seem genuinely unhappy with their lives. One of these students was Reed. Reed spoke about not getting enough positive attention from his aunt (his custodial guardian), either affection or buying him things. Reed has lived with his aunt for several years while his mother is in prison. He never mentioned his father.

Most of our interview centered on the things he likes to buy, how he spends his time, and why people buy things. It was similar to interviews I conducted with other students. He said he liked name brands, but could name very few that he liked and even fewer that he owned. His favorite way to spend time was talking on the phone to his girlfriend, friends, and sisters. This made a lot of sense given how lonely he seemed. The turn in the interview came near what I had thought would be the end when I asked him what question he would ask if he were doing the same research. He said, "Do you love your life?" This was a more general question than I usually received as a response, but as was my practice, I pose his question to him. He responds, "Not all the time."

"Why do you think you don't always love your life?" I ask.

He says, "I don't know. I just be getting mad, so sometimes I think about doing stuff. But, I don't want to do it, so I just be thinking about it."

"Like what do you mean?" I ask.

"Sometimes I think about running away, like hurting myself, stuff like that."

Trying not to show any type of judgment in voice or gesture, I respond, "But you don't do it. Why don't you do it?"

Reed says, "Cause if I do it I could die or something."

His mention of hurting himself, even though he immediately followed this up with a statement that he wouldn't ever do either of these things, worries me.

I ask, "But it's not worth that?" to clarify that hurting himself or dying is too dire a consequence to get attention. He nods his agreement. I wait to see if he wants to say anything else. When he doesn't, I break the silence. "I know the feeling of being upset

about things. When I was a kid, I used to get into a lot of trouble.”²² He nods again in response, this time a sheepish smile creeping in on the side of his mouth.

“Anyway, how old are you?” I ask.

“Fourteen.”

“See, so you only have four more years until you’re out and gone to college.”

Knowing he plans to apply to boarding schools next year, I add, “Only one more to move out if you go to boarding school.”

Reed grins, “Umm hmm. My birthday was yesterday.”

I respond enthusiastically, “Happy Birthday, Reed!”

He smiles again and says, “Thank you.”

I don’t really want to end the interview, but it is time for classes to change.

Thankfully Reed’s attitude and demeanor has improved. “I think it’s hard to love your life sometimes, especially when you think things are unfair.” Reed nods in agreement, but is still smiling. “Reed, thank you so much for all of your time and doing this interview with me.”

Smiling, he says, “You’re welcome,” as he stands up.

As we exited the room together, I felt confident that he was in no immediate danger; however, I was still unsure about what to do about our conversation. I weighed promises of confidentiality and the sense of well being these provide against the possibility of harm in not telling someone else in his life. These deliberations left me with no clear path of action. I turned back to the research I thought would prepare me for this endeavor in the first place.

According to Fisher, Higgins-D’Alessandro, Rau, Kuther, and Belanger (1996), there are three possible options when confronted with this type of information from a minor: take no action, report suspected risks to an appropriate adult, or help the adolescent to self-refer to agencies to help him independently seek services. They found that urban adolescents believed that researchers should break confidentiality in cases where an adolescent was likely to hurt himself or others. In addition, the youngest group

²² Although Reed has not talked about being in trouble in this section of the interview, getting in trouble with his aunt and losing privileges was a recurring theme earlier in the interview.

in the study, seventh graders, also believed less severe risks were appropriate to report to adults (p. 2096). Although reporting a teenager to an outside authority does break agreements of research confidentiality, oversteps guidelines set up with participants, and causes potential harm (should the tween be punished by parents or authorities), not reporting may lead to physical or psychological harm, making these ethical questions more than methodological ones.

Eder and Corsaro (1999) point out that nonintervention on the part researchers can “decrease young people’s perceptions of adults as responsible advocates on their behalf” (p. 527). Similarly Fisher et al. (1996) say,

Even under traditional informed consent procedures, in which participant confidentiality is assured, adolescents, especially middle schoolers, may expect to be helped when they tell an adult investigator they are a victim of abuse or involved in high risk behaviors. An investigator’s failure to help a teenager who has disclosed such problems may unintentionally send messages that the problem is unimportant, that no services are available, or that knowledgeable adults can not be depended upon to help children in need. (p. 2096)

In Reed’s situation, I tried to determine the depth of his feelings of unhappiness and assured him afterward that I was there if he wanted to talk. I also asked enough questions throughout the interview to determine (to the best of my ability) that his sense of unhappiness was not the result of physical or mental abuse. His unhappiness appeared to stem from the amount of things and type of attention that his cousins (his aunt’s grandchildren) received in contrast to himself. However, I felt unprepared to assess the situation and had minimal ability to help alleviate his sense of unhappiness and loneliness. Also, given his age (fourteen) it was unlikely that he would independently seek help, even if I knew where to refer him. In this instance, I chose to break confidentiality and tell the head of school. This decision did not come easily and was based on several factors.

First, I consulted two professors familiar with ethnography to seek their advice in the matter. Upon my recounting the event, both agreed that his telling me (an adult, albeit a special kind of adult) was an important factor in gauging the seriousness of the risk. He

clearly told an adult, not a peer or friend, and as an adult I am understood to have some sort of power and responsibility. However, I worked very hard to become a liminal adult who was seen as less of an authority figure. Had he wanted immediate action he could easily have accessed the school counselor, head of school, or any teacher. This signaled to me that he did not want his disclosure to become a “school” matter.²³ He also told an adult who had promised confidentiality.

Second, I consulted the IRB regulations, which as Fisher et al. (1996) found in their investigation, were ambiguous regarding such confession. Reed did not disclose abuse or make a clear threat to himself or others. He made a statement to me that I remember making many times as an adolescent, and that I imagine many feel at some point during their adolescence. Therefore, I did not contact the IRB. Not only did this event not fit into their regulations, but I also believe that Scholastic Middle has a support system that is capable and willing to address this matter appropriately. I believed that contacting the IRB would lead to it, and other government bureaucracies such as the Florida Department of Children and Families, becoming involved and these actions would not ultimately be in Reed’s best interest.

Finally, based on advice from professors, a lack of direction from the IRB documents, and my own knowledge of the school, I made an appointment with the head of school, Mr. Tejera. I decided to speak with Mr. Tejera because of both his relationship to the students and the staff. He is highly respected and trusted by the faculty and staff. His relationship with the students would be the envy of any school administrator. He knows every child by name, reviews their grades individually every grading period, meets with them frequently for both discipline and rewards, and often informally speaks with them. During most lunch and recess periods, he is among the students.

I knew that once I told Mr. Tejera about my conversation with Reed, the decisions regarding how to proceed would be out of my hands. I trusted that he would both listen to my suggestions and ultimately make a decision based on Reed’s welfare. Trying to

²³ Prior to this interview, I had been privy to two student conversations regarding the desire not to speak to certain teachers or the guidance counselor because he or she would “tell everyone.” Therefore, speaking with certain school officials is viewed as tantamount to notifying all adults, and as such, is a risk.

preserve some degree of confidentiality between Reed and me, I told Mr. Tejera I was concerned that Reed was unhappy to an extent that might not be healthy. After asking me several questions regarding whether I had reason to believe he was being abused or was an immediate danger to himself, Mr. Tejera determined that he would follow up with Reed without disclosing our conversation. He mentioned that grades had just come out and Reed had done well, indicating that would be a topic of conversation the next time he saw him. He determined he would make an effort to pay Reed extra attention and ask him how things were going without involving other members of the staff. Upon leaving his office, I felt confident that I had made the right decision in disclosing the incident to Mr. Tejera. I felt comfortable in Mr. Tejera's ability both to make an accurate judgment of Reed's state of mind given our interaction in his interview and to act on that judgment in ways that would provide the most benefit to Reed.

I made this choice based on the relationship that I saw the head of school having with the students at Scholastic Middle and the one that I believed Reed saw himself having with me. He did not confuse me with a peer; in telling me he told an adult. However, in my liminal role, he was telling an adult whom he saw as someone who was okay chat with, not a counselor or "official" person. Given our relationship, one in which I was an adult with adult responsibilities but not someone officially responsible for his welfare, I believed that breaking confidentiality was the appropriate response. As I interacted with Reed in the months after our interview (I, like Mr. Tejera, trying to pay him special attention without seeming to), he was happier and even mentioned the head of school congratulating him on his high grades.

I reflect on this interaction frequently and am grateful to Mr. Tejera and the other members of Scholastic Middle for providing a supportive and professional atmosphere where Reed was helped without large bureaucratic institutions becoming involved. It also makes me reflect on IRB procedures and how they are both useful and useless in defining ethical research. Working through numerous questions and definitions regarding confidentiality and risk gave me a framework for thinking about this interaction with Reed. I knew that as a person I felt for him and wanted to help, but also that it was my responsibility as a researcher to do so. However, the rules of the IRB gave me no footing

for acting in Reed's best interest. To consider this an adverse event, itself not well defined when placed against the wide range of possibilities in human interaction, would have placed Reed's life in further upheaval as various government institutions may have become involved. I don't believe this was the most ethical course of action. Most of all, it makes me grateful for having my own "review system," friends and scholars, who take these issues seriously and helped me make the best decision.

Conclusion

I came into this project well versed in qualitative methods and committed to the idea of an ethnographic project. Following the tenets of critical ethnography, my research questions inform from the perspectives of marginal populations. In the case of U.S. consumer society, the condemnation placed on the consumption of poor, minority, urban tweens and teens makes them ideal participants in such a study.

An ideal research site and population, Scholastic Middle and its students were open, critically minded, and willing to speak and interact with me. Although our interactions didn't always unfold as I expected, I learned a lot about the students, about critical auto/ethnography, and about my own abilities. My relationships with participants led to interesting and unforeseen ethical considerations. At various points in the research I was referred to as old and rich. My gender and race were never questioned. Although being an "old, rich, white lady" isn't how I see myself, maintaining my status as a liminal adult made the most important aspect of my identity: someone who "wouldn't tell on you."

This chapter elucidates how I interacted in the physical scene and with the participants with which this work took place. Chapter 4 sets the theoretical scene for this work.

Chapter 4

Setting the Theoretical Scene

How Much Does it Cost?

“Don’t you know it’s rude to ask people how much things cost?” my cousin, Ginny, spits out and exchanges a look with her boyfriend, Sam.

Shocked, my 9-year-old body tenses up. I step back, moving slightly away from her, and turn my back. I refocus my gaze on the gray, scuffed toes of my white Puma tennis shoes purchased at the discount store Big Lots. They aren’t the brand I wanted, but I love the three metallic lilac stripes that run down the sides. I study the grooves in the rubber patch over the toe (which adds to their durability and retro look) and blink as hard and as fast as I can. I don’t know if blinking really stops me from crying, but it’s all I can think to do. My shoes blur a bit as the tears win over my rapidly fluttering eyelids. “Please don’t let them see me cry,” I think. I don’t know if I’m making this plea to God, myself, or my cousin and her boyfriend.

I face the busy street, pretending to be fascinated by the traffic streaming by. My abrupt movement doesn’t seem to register with them; or maybe they’re just so sick of me and my tactlessness they don’t notice or care. I hope it’s that they don’t notice. I continue to study the traffic as it streams through the once stately and now slightly run-down residential neighborhood. Large, one-hundred-year-old houses line the street. Directly across the street is a brown house with large scalloped shingle siding and thick wooden trim. The trim could use a little paint and the lawn is littered with beer cans, bottles, and other party debris courtesy of the university students who rent it from one of the “absent” landlords who so irritate my grandparents. I focus on the details around me to try and block out what just happened.

I know my face is red and splotchy, but after counting the 37th car moving toward Syracuse University, I’m pretty sure the tears have stopped. I move further away from Ginny and Sam to the large maple positioned directly in front of my grandparents’ house

in the strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street. I move around the tree on the pretense of picking weeds. I kneel down and dash my hands across my face to wipe away the tear streaks.

I think about what just happened, as I pull the small green shoots from between the pink and red flowers surrounding the tree. I replay it in my mind, and it doesn't add up. Somehow I offended her by complimenting her ring, but I guess it wasn't just her ring.

This entire week had been different than any I'd ever spent at my grandparents. For the first time ever I had met Ginny, my second cousin, and her boyfriend, Sam. They were in Syracuse for my grandparents' 30th anniversary and my great-grandmother's 80th birthday. The family had used these landmark events as an excuse for an extended family reunion. Although many other relatives came, I don't remember them now. Ginny and Sam were in college and Sam was cute. To my nine-year-old mind they signified what I could be one day. They were like exciting, beautiful aliens from the planet University. I had never been around anyone who was in college and in love. I *needed* to know how to be them and about how to become an in-love college student myself. Growing up in a household under constant financial stress, my chosen tool of measurement was cost. I kept telling Ginny how much I liked her things and asking how much they cost. I was gathering important information! She hadn't said anything about it until now. I didn't know it was rude. I didn't know *I* was rude.

Foundations of Social Life

This project takes for granted that race, class, and unavoidable status as a consumer create complicated performances and understandings of self—of identity—in a consumer culture. It is an attempt to understand social life and human communication in the realm of consumer culture. This chapter situates my work and, in many ways, my understandings of my identity—and the identities of the tweens—theoretically and empirically in larger knowledge systems.

First, I move through a brief overview of contemporary social life and its implications for consumer culture. Next, I apply Giddens's (1986) structuration theory and Foucault's (1977) disciplinary society to the overall structural and agential tensions

inherent in our current consumer system. I also utilize Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of cultural capital, reconversion strategies, and habitus and Munoz's (1999) disidentification theory to further explain how these structural and agential tensions are lived through. Third, I discuss identity formation and consumer culture from the perspective of impression management (Goffman, 1959), with a particular focus on consumer culture's influence on the identity constructions of poor, minority, urban youth.

Radical Modernity

Claims about how the world works declare how we see the world as a whole, its components, and the opportunities for decision-making and social change on an individual and societal level. Ultimately, what we want to know, and at least partially answer, when we declare a label for contemporary life is whether we have any control over what Giddens (1990) calls the "juggernaut" of modern society (p. 139).

The modern world has been defined in the last two to three centuries by industrialization. Giddens (1990) sees a "radicalized modernity" in the recent manifestations of globalization and feelings of fragmentation. He claims this is not a postmodern era but "modernity coming to understand itself" (Giddens, 1990, p. 48). As we make the plethora of decisions of everyday life, we look toward the future rather than the past. These decisions are highly influenced by revisions to enlightenment thinking coupled with human reflexivity. Giddens (1990) states,

The break with providential views of history, the dissolution of foundationalism, together with the emergence of counterfactual future-oriented thought and the "emptying out" of progress by continuous change, are so different from the core perspectives of the Enlightenment as to warrant the view that far-reaching transitions have occurred. Yet referring to these as post-modernity is a mistake that hampers an accurate understanding of their nature and implications. The disjunctions that have taken place should rather be seen as resulting from the self-clarification of modern thought, as the remnants of tradition and providential outlooks are cleared away. We have not moved beyond modernity but are living precisely through a phase of its radicalization. (p. 51)

As modernity has matured and the reflexivity of human agents has entered into everyday decisions, a sense of dislocation and lack of foundation of self and society has become a defining feature of day-to-day life. I find my own call to late or radicalized modernity through personal experience, an understanding of the progress narrative, and the construction of consumerism.

Personal Experience

The first reason I continue to situate our contemporary culture and myself in modernity, rather than postmodernity, is because I feel modern. I do not feel disconnected and discombobulated in my everyday life. I have choices to make; I reflect on those choices and am challenged by the many ways of being they represent. At times these choices do lead to feelings of fragmentation. However, I am also, and desire to be, consistently *me*. It is always Liz looking back at herself in the mirror. It is always she who makes the decisions, no matter how many choices or what the constraints. I attempt to overcome any fragmentation I feel with a coherent narrative that both guides my life forward and is revised in light of new events and circumstances. It is my experience of the everyday that first and foremost suggests a radically modern life. The opening story of this chapter exemplifies the influence of the progress narrative in my life. My goal in asking Ginny about her ring was to become a better, more “in the know” person, to become like her and achieve that kind of identity—a university student. As I recount the story now, it is as a lived educational experience that has indeed informed and constructed my current understanding of self.

It is in this world that I and the tweens with whom I worked live—one where a coherent sense of self is sought, even as it is simultaneously created, altered, and limited through innumerable choices, actions, and constraints. We make choices to progress toward ideal, or at least acceptable, future selves.

The Progress Narrative

A second feature of modernity that proliferates my life and, therefore, recommends a modern understanding of it is that the coherent narrative I seek, is best understood as a progress narrative. A progress narrative is a historical account that sees humanity as evolving and becoming *more* humane, intelligent, successful, and so forth.

Despite the failure of a teleological historical narrative (one that is destined for a final result or inherent purpose), the progress narrative exists as an achievable future-oriented story for both individuals and society. Even though I can look to history and see that human beings have not always evolved for the better but instead have often meandered and severely regressed, I still seek a progress narrative for myself and use it to critique decisions made on individual, interpersonal, community, national, and international levels. Whatever the past holds, the goal for the future is progress. Throughout my daily life, I make innumerable choices. At the end of the day, week, month, year, and decade, I work to make these choices fit within a narrative of progress, of positive change and growth regarding achievements in education, financial security, moral behavior, and so forth. Gaddis (2002) says that historians “interpret the past for the purposes of the present with a view to managing the future” (p. 10). Historians may construct narratives of entire peoples, nations, and civilizations, but we are all historians of our own lives, the lives of those we are intimately connected to, and our communities, and we use the same or similar narrative moves to create identity.

I’m not the only one engaging in this type of narrative construction. The tweens I worked with do as well. They spoke of needing to “look good” outside of their homes and the effort they and their parents put toward looking good. The tweens “looked good” for both the immediate moment and the future. When I asked why it was important to look good even when running errands, they often mentioned that looking good now would benefit them in their future careers. The tweens learned how to dress and groom themselves for the mall, and in so doing they were building skills for the future. Therefore they will be better at a future interview or job moment, which will, in turn, take its own place in their progressive life narrative.²⁴ In addition, progress is the goal of Scholastic Middle, which is working to build “ideal” adults.

The progress narrative is also the basis for critique of events on a grander scale. National and international changes, choices, and movements are critiqued against the goal of progress. Depending on the perspective, global warming, genocide, war, and world hunger are all seen as either affronts to the goals of progress or a means for

²⁴ This need to “look good” is instilled in them by both their parents and peers and is an issue more fully addressed in chapter 6.

reaching them. Corporate profits and the standard of living of countries are expected to rise, to progress from their current levels. We use the progress narrative as a tool for imagining how current decisions will create a future in which we have evolved and become better. The students of Scholastic Middle expect to become smarter as they progress through school. They believe hard work will get them into good high schools and colleges from which they will emerge with the skills to get good jobs and become more financially secure than their families are now.²⁵ However, they also know it is not just school that will get them where they need to go. They believe the pride they take in dressing themselves will also aid them in this quest. The tweens desire to “look good” shows that, whether on a global or personal scale, we look to consumer goods to aid us in our progress.

Construction of Consumerism

Advertising, the backbone of a consumer culture, also operates as a narrative of progress. Advertisers tell us we need new products in order to be better—more attractive; more feminine or more masculine; more powerful; more likeable; more organized; more successful; more enlightened; more fit; more interesting; better parents, lovers, spouses, students, and teachers (see Dittmar, 2008). Our desire to consume would be greatly diminished without a clear connection between consumer goods and personal betterment and progress. Society would be forced to adapt an altered basis for culture and capitalism²⁶ without the desire to consistently buy. Structuration theory offers a vocabulary to better understand the effects of modern ideals and consumer culture on the experience of social life.

Structuration Theory

Giddens’s (1986) structuration theory offers a complex view of late modern life by addressing the relationship of structure and agency—both micro and macro, subjective

²⁵ Although meritocracy has little foundation in actual life and upward class mobility is more myth than experience, this does not change the hope these tweens have regarding their futures.

²⁶ Cohen (1998) traces the move from a producer economy to a consumer economy to Roosevelt’s New Deal. Through two strategies—empowering citizen consumers and utilizing their aggregate purchasing power to pull the nation out of the depression—the roles of citizen and consumer became one. Therefore, our identities as U.S. citizens are tied to consumption.

and objective, individual and society, everyday and grand social theory—as a “duality” that works to create social life and human interaction (p. xx-xxi). Giddens intentionally moves away from language that separates agency and structure as detached processes. Structure is both the medium and outcome of agents’ conduct. As Richter (2000) states, “Structuration theory is concerned with the relationship of structure and agency and the persistence of social systems across time and space” (p. 362). The basic premise of structuration theory is that agents determine structure through their actions, as structure simultaneously enables and constrains those actions and gives them meaning. They are mutually reinforcing.

The interrogation of the interaction between agent and structure is key to understanding consumer culture and consumption practices. Consumers act at the junctures of personal identity, relationships, advertising, consumer culture, and capitalism, among other systems. Consumer culture acts as a structuring force that socializes individuals to seek to create, supplement, and alter their identities through consumption. Our agency is achieved in the creation, supplementation, and alteration of our identities through consumption. In other words, consumers are in a constant state of influencing and being influenced by the structures involved in consumption.

Structuration theory has been used in varying disciplines, within several contexts, and with differing goals (see Bryant & Jarey, 2001). In communication, it has largely been used by those studying organizations (Banks and Riley, 1993; Bastien, McPhee, & Bolton, 1995; Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990; Howard & Geist, 1995; Poole, & McPhee, 1983; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998; Whitmer, 1997). It is useful for analysis of organizations because it takes into account the simultaneous influence of both employee agency and organizational constraints, such as work content, rules, hierarchy, and architecture on communication and understanding. Communication is key to both expressions of agency and structure. Banks and Riley (1993) hail structuration theory as an opportunity for a unifying overarching theory for communication researchers. Conversely, Conrad (see also Richter, 2000) proposes that communication has a great deal to offer structuration theory.

The use of structuration theory in communication currently outstrips its use in studies of consumer culture. In consumer culture studies, Moiso, Arnould, and Price (2004) use structuration theory to discuss the construction of family identity through food, and Gauntlett (2002) uses it to explain identity formation through television. Drawing on Reckwitz (2002) and Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny (2001), Warde (2005) calls for the use of “theories of practice,” which are neither individualistic nor holistic but explain social life from both aspects of consumption. Warde cites Giddens’s structuration theory as a key theoretical framework for understanding both the micro and macro aspects of consumption and avoiding “methodological individualist accounts of ‘the consumer’” while creating work “concerned as much with what people do and feel as what they mean” (p. 132). Although not referencing structuration theory in particular, Chin (2001) likewise states,

Despite the importance of individual choices, poverty is structurally determined by such elements as an increasingly globalized economy, institutionalized racism, unequal provision of goods and services, policymaking, social geography, and a host of other factors not in control of any given individual, and least of all a poor one living in an urban ghetto. This is not to say that individual decisions can have no impact on either life trajectories or structural factors, but rather to make the point that any framework that gives undue weight to either agency or structure is fundamentally flawed. (p. 44)

Therefore attending to the levels of both structure and agency in the lives of the tweens in this study is essential to building a useful understanding of the ways they engage consumer culture. To set a foundation for a holistic and yet nuanced study, I will lay out a brief synopsis of structuration theory, paying special attention to structuration, structure, agency, discursive consciousness, practical consciousness, the unconscious, reflexivity, and ontological security. I begin my explanation with the concept of structuration. I then move on to its two overarching concepts: structure and agency. Next, I enter into a discussion of the various types of knowledge influencing the agency enacted by individuals. After addressing two key critiques made against structuration theory, I will connect it to the theories of Foucault, Bourdieu, and Munoz in order to further flesh

out the theoretical basis for this study. Finally, I will address identity as enacted through impression management (Goffman, 1959) and studies that attend to this poor, urban, minority youth consumption.

Structuration

In a slightly more understandable definition than Giddens's own, J. H. Turner (1991) says, "Structuration is, therefore, the dual processes [structure and agency] in which rules and resources are used to organize interaction across time and in space and, by virtue of this use, to reproduce or transform these rules and resources" (p. 526-527). Specifically, structuration is the process whereby social relations and individual actions create structures that remain relatively stable across time and space. Structures are neither solidified nor stable; instead, structures are perpetuated to appear so by the continued taking of action (Giddens & Pierson, 1998).

Structure is created, maintained, and transformed through the actions of agents or the agency of human actors. Without structure, agents would have no meaningful context for actions, and without actions, structure would not be formed and perpetuated. This is the "duality of structure," the core of how structuration comes about. Agents act and these actions affect social systems, while social systems allow and constrain agents' actions. This process of mutual influence between structure and agency is continuous and simultaneous.

Structure and Agency

Giddens defines structure as "the rules and resources recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems" (Giddens, 1986, p. 377). Rules are the patterns of social life. Resources are the means through which power is exercised in these patterns. Structure enables and constrains social action, but structure is something created and used by actors, not an external reality, a "thing," used on, for, or against actors.

Structure can be transformed or reaffirmed as actors use its rules and resources in real, concrete social situations. It is transformative and flexible and depends upon the "regularities of social reproduction" (Giddens & Pierson, 1998, p. 77). Although structures exist only through human action and can, therefore, be changed by that action, they remain relatively stable because people continue to reproduce them and thus have a

self-preserving bias. For example, as citizens in a consumer culture, we continue to place value on material goods beyond their use value, we continue to buy and reproduce the structure that determines that we need new things (better things, more things) than are necessary for survival or even a modest level of comfort. As agents/consumers we buy and perpetuate the structure of consumer culture.

The compliance of agents is necessary for structures to be produced, reproduced, and transformed. However, agents are not aware that their actions affect structures due to the resources agents have access to and the rules they are bound by in everyday life situations. Giddens and Pierson (1998) state,

The apparent objectivity of the social world, the ways that it appears, from the point of view of any individual, ordered and rule-governed, are in reality an unintended consequence—an outcome neither premeditated nor designed by any one person or group—of the routinized practices that all individuals must employ in order to conduct their daily affairs. (p. 12)

Giddens defines agency as the events or actions an agent perpetuates, not their intentions, meant ends, motivations, and so forth. Agency is enacted in the visible consequences of a person's actions (Giddens 1986; Giddens and Pierson, 1998; J. H. Turner, 1991). An important question to ask is how is power created or wielded in this action-central relationship between agency and structure. Giddens criticizes notions of power that favor the capability of actors to freely act or the bias built into institutions, and again calls for understanding agency and structure as related expressions of power and a feature of the duality of structure. He goes on to say,

Power within social systems, which enjoy some continuity over time and space, presumes regularized relations of autonomy and dependence between actors or collectivities in contexts of social interaction. But all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors. (Giddens, 1986, p. 16)

Structures encourage some actions more than others but often cannot fully deny other actions. Similar actions taken over time become regionalized and routinized, which leads to the creation and recreation of structures.

Giddens's use of the term "regionalization" is largely borrowed from Goffman (1959), who states that locales differ in terms of their modes (boundaries—physical and symbolic, duration across time, span in physical space, and character), disclosure of self, and extent of understanding of front stage (public) and back stage (private) performance aspects (Goffman, 1959; J. H. Turner, 1991). Routinization is achieved when interaction is relegated in an orderly and predictable manner—when participants understand the basic composition of what will happen in a given situation. Routines extend social structures across time and space through the techniques of opening and closing rituals, turn taking, tact, positioning, and framing (Goffman, 1959; J. H. Turner, 1991). For example, in the region of the classroom, the routines of teacher and students are established in ways that a student or teacher can enter most classrooms or lecture halls and have a relatively precise idea of how to act and how and where events will unfold.²⁷

Regionalization creates routines, which further create social institutions that are relatively stable and remain intact over time and space. Agents know what the structure expects in terms of their actions; therefore, they act in accordance with the region and routine. Thus, they reproduce its structure. Actors ground institutions in time and space by orienting "their bodies and self in regionalized and routinized situations of co-presence" (J. H. Turner, 1991, p. 536-537), while these actions and stages are simultaneously shaped by structure. The regionalized and routinized behaviors of agents are enabled by the possession of certain knowledges.

Agent Knowledges

In order to understand the regionalization and routinization of action, as well as the ability to participate in social life, agents must have certain knowledge and reflexivity regarding information. Social life would cease to function without the reflexive use of discursive and practical knowledges and social actors' unconscious knowledge.

Reflexivity can be understood as self-consciousness and "the monitored character of the ongoing flow of social life" (Giddens, 1986, p. 3). Reflexivity is the ability to make sense of social life by finding, recognizing, and using patterns and rules. Reflexivity is how we come to know others and structure. It is the capability to see one's self and social

²⁷ Of course, routines will vary by culture and other circumstances.

processes. Reflexivity is enabled by both the continuity of social practices and the various knowledges that agents hold. People, whether they consciously realize it or not, carry with them extensive knowledge about how social life works. Giddens (1986) identifies three areas of knowledge that all agents possess: discursive, practical, and unconscious. Social actors are aware of each of these knowledges at different levels.

Discursive knowledge is explicit knowledge. It is the knowledge that “we know what we know” and can articulate and explain it to others. For instance, getting dressed is a complex practice that has many rules, as well as many instances where the rules morph into new ones or are broken. There are appropriate outfits for different audiences and occasions. Often stores are even organized according to these different events, for instance, casual, work, working out, and formal events. This is a form of discursive consciousness, because I not only understand it, but I can also easily articulate it to others. Interestingly, my ability to articulate it is partly because it is clearly differentiated in the consumer system. Discursive or explicit knowledge is only one relatively small part of our knowledge base.

A greater degree of our knowledge about social life lies not in discursive but in practical consciousness. Practical consciousness is what is known in the doing, but not necessarily available for articulation by actors. In regards to practical consciousness, Bernstein (1986) states,

We are not “cultural dopes” nor are we agents who are self-transparently aware of what we are doing. We are always in the process of making history in circumstances that are not of our choosing, and we are not (and cannot be) fully aware of what we are doing and making. (p. 241)

An example of practical consciousness is knowledge about gender and attention to clothing. Growing up I know that girls were supposed to have more clothes. And care more about those clothes than boys.²⁸ I did not know why and my (and my brother’s)

²⁸ Although an arguably generalized assumption in mainstream U.S. culture the weight of these assumptions is based in the particular circumstances of my upbringing. Growing up 20 years ago, in the rural South, and under the influence of religious conservatism, the distinctions between what was appropriate for boys and girls/ men and women were more distinct than they are currently for many groups. Obviously, the tweens in this study do not have the same understandings.

successful functioning in our world was not dependent upon our abilities to articulate these differences, only to follow them. As I began to reflect on norms regarding gender and attention to clothing, I moved this knowledge from practical to discursive consciousness where I can articulate and interrogate it. Below the levels of discursive and practical consciousness is the unconscious.

The unconscious is repressed and unknown yet motivates us to find ontological security (i.e. the nature of the “real”). We move through the world with a feeling of relative safety because ontological security allows us to achieve trust with others and reduce anxiety. The ability to predict what is likely to happen and to know what is appropriate through the unconscious understanding of regionalization and routinization is both necessary to achieve ontological security and an unconscious incentive to perpetuate structures. A great deal of motivation for action comes from the unconscious. Often this knowledge can be seen as instinctual and is separated from practical and discursive consciousness. Insurance operates on this level. Taglines like “You’re in good hands,” and “We’ve got you covered,” are intended to soothe our anxiety about the unknown. Even if the unpredictable happens, a company is there to make the consequences of that event predictable—we will be returned to our present and known state through financial compensation. Along with unintended consequences, which will be discussed later, the unconscious serves as a key boundary upon knowledge.

Structuration theory offers a rich basis for an analysis of the influence of consumer culture on the identity constructions of poor, minority, urban, tweens because it intertwines agency and structure. An individual’s agency is not free from the constraints of structure. These constraints are more severe for those in marginalized populations (see Chin, 2001). The students of Scholastic Middle have severe limitations placed on their thoughts, actions, and understandings of the systems that constrain them. Consumer culture is one of those constraining (and enabling) systems. It fills some of the need for ontological security, which lies in the unconscious, and certainly operates at the levels of the practical more often than the discursive. However, the students are also working consciously to make consumer decisions carefully and with the strategic goals of care and belonging in mind. The students utilize the resources of the consumer system, even as

they are constrained by it and the hierarchies of class, race, and age. Although structuration theory is a useful tool for framing these tweens' identity work, it is heavily critiqued regarding agency and social change.

Critiques

Structuration theory is not without its critics (see Archer, 1982, 1995, 1996; Willmott, 1999). The critiques of most concern for this project are those dealing with the limits of agency and the ability for structural change and transformation.

Many, myself included, are wary of placing the entire fate and functioning of social systems and human society within agency. Purely agential arguments allow societal institutions free reign in terms of how they/we attempt to control human lives. Many who have studied the urban poor (see Bourgois, 1995; Chin, 2001; Macleod, 1987; Nightingale, 1993) problematize overemphasizing individual agency without attending to structural constraints. The unreflexive rhetoric of the individual perpetuates the system by ignoring systemic ramifications on people's lives. Structuration theory has been accused of inadequately critiquing structures by focusing too heavily on the level of the individual (e.g., Archer, 1982, 1995, 1996; Willmott, 1999). Archer (1982, 1995, 1996) and Willmott (1999) argue for the use of analytical dualism (a separation of agency and structure) rather than duality of structure (seeing agency and structure as dependent parts of the same process) believing that it reduces structure to agency (because structure is only reproduced through human action).

However, at no point does Giddens claim complete freedom to choose among infinite possible actions. Actions are always constrained; however, there is always some degree of choice among actions. In addition, the disagreement regarding the definitions and differentiations between socialization and agency means that the ability to act is confused with the desire to act. Giddens and Pierson (1998) warn against confusing agency with socialization.

One mustn't confuse the logical notion of agency with the sociological notion of socialization. One is part of an explanation of what it is to be a human being in the first place, while the other is much more an account of what actually happens

to certain kinds of person in certain kinds of setting as a result of social influences around them. ‘Social influences’ aren’t like causal connections in nature. (p. 79)

Although agents are constrained by motivations (the desire to be successful, belong, survive, etc.) and limitations (around race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and resources available, etc.) of the system, individuals still make choices, and choices are manifestations of agency. For Giddens and Pierson, agency is the ability to have acted otherwise. “All social constraints are only constraints in terms of motives or interests actors have” (1998, p. 85). Social constraints do not prohibit the ability to act; they make actions detrimental, unattractive, even unknown, but not impossible.

Use of agency does not mean that individuals necessarily realize, at any level of consciousness, the ramifications of their actions and therefore intentionally perpetuate structures. Actors may not know (and often certainly do not know), even in practical consciousness, the entire set of ramifications and breadth of a single structure they rebuild through action. Structures are in some respects external processes for individual actors. As Giddens and Pierson (1998) write, “The individual doesn’t carry within himself or herself the whole gamut of social life” (p. 87).

Giddens does not paint for us an entirely volitional subject, but one who acts both to maintain and change the social system and therefore perpetuates the structure. Given concerns about “blaming” human actors for social systems and my particular goal in this work to bring complexity to accusations of hedonism, selfishness, and irrationality leveled at poor, urban, minority tweens for their choices in consuming, a theory which says structure is recursively created by agents may seem an odd choice. However, although the agents I am working with are severely constrained by the systems of race, class, and age, among others, and I am working with them in the highly structured environment of Scholastic Middle, they are also agents in the terms set forth by structuration theory—they are individuals who act in the world. The tweens have choices, albeit limited choices, about how to act and how to make sense (knowledge) of their actions. Structuration theory accounts for the constraints placed on them by multiple structures, as well as the consequences of and sensemaking around their actions.

Another, and seemingly opposite, critique leveled at structuration theory is that it does not adequately account for social change. For Giddens, change is incremental and focused on the individual, as she is in the process of creating and upholding the structure. Although it is always initially harder to change, to move against momentum and bias, it is possible. Giddens sees social change as coming about through human reflexivity and the movement of knowledge from practical consciousness to discursive consciousness.²⁹ How structuration theory accounts for social change is an especially pertinent question when studying consumer culture, a system that is dependent upon change (although not social change)³⁰ for its survival. Consumer culture thrives on planned obsolescence. If a large portion of the population bought one set of furniture, one car, one wardrobe, or one home and was satisfied at least until that object had lost all use value (i.e., until the furniture breaks, the car no longer works, the clothes no longer fit or are torn, the house falls apart), the consumer system would cease to operate. Constant change is the rule of this system. The ability to consume is the resource both for achieving this change and being a full member of the system.

Understanding change as a constant is not as disjointed a concept as it may first appear, and it offers the basis for explanation of consumer class immobility. Bourdieu (1984) found that in “reconversion strategies” change is the only constant in the ways that those in the lower realms of the class hierarchy try to catch up with and emulate the higher realms. One group cannot catch up to another through the purchase of goods previously used by that class (for instance education or a particular designer brand), because the class above will simply move on to another symbol of status, thereby cancelling out any status that might have been gained. As Bourdieu (1984) states,

The actions whereby each class (or class fraction) works to win new advantages, i.e., to gain an advantage over the other classes and so, objectively, to reshape the structure of objective relations between the classes (the relations revealed by the

²⁹ The movement of knowledge from the unconscious to practical conscious is rare because of its often repressed nature.

³⁰ Consumer culture does not depend upon social change, but does incorporate social change into the system. For instance, a more mobile society creates a need for cell phones and laptop computers. It could also be argued that a more mobile society was enabled by mobile technology.

statistical distributions of properties), are compensated for (and so cancelled out ordinarily) by the reactions of the other classes, directed toward the same objective. In this particular (though very common) case, the outcome of these opposing actions, which cancel each other out by the very counter movements that they generate, is an overall displacement of the assets of the distribution. (p. 157)

It is the distance between the classes, rather than individual status symbols, which is maintained by a constant changing of what constitutes a class

In a close approximation of Bourdieu's reconversion strategies, Poole and McPhee (1983), in their application of structuration theory to organizational climate, state, "Members use rules and resources to maintain their places or to attempt to rise in the hierarchy; the structure of rules and resources thus *produces* the status system" (p. 210). Here the authors are referring to organizational hierarchy, but the moves that produce the status system are the same movements Bourdieu (1984) documents for class status. The use of the rules and resources inherent in the structure reproduce the same hierarchies and structures. For instance, the purchasing of Louis Vuitton bags and purses became popular in the middle and lower classes in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and, as such, the market for fake versions exploded. As purchasing these copycat bags became a popular reconversion strategy among the lower classes, it became necessary for those in the upper class to be adept at pointing out the distinctions between fake and real versions as well as to move on to other styles. This counter-action cancels out any movement by the lower classes in the hierarchy. The rules of status consumption demand that one is always consuming the new status item and changing their consumption.

The need for constant change is the case not only for the consumer system but also, some argue, for the continuance of late modern life (Sennett, 1998; Taylor, 1991). To change is to take a chance on something new. The need to constantly change is the need to constantly be at risk. These human needs in the late modern era of seemingly infinite choices fit the agenda of consumer culture. Late modernity is full of choices, and it demands that we engage with them to function in social life and seek out our "authentic" future and selves (Taylor, 1991). The progress narrative is still in force in our

late modern time. Progress is achieved through change, and one way change is achieved is in the consumer system. Structuration theory, reconversion strategies, and a future-oriented progress narrative help explain how individuals create and make sense of their identities in late modernity via participation as consumers.

Many of those who critique Giddens's structuration theory for its emphasis on agency adhere to a more Foucauldian idea of disciplined agency (Foucault, 1977). Discipline is essential to the perpetuation of the consumer system. Thus Foucault's concept deserves note here. However, I do not see these theories as mutually exclusive; as such, I link structuration to discipline in order to draw a clearer picture of consumer culture as it operates in the lives of poor, minority, urban youth.

The Disciplinary Society

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) details the modern system of disciplinary power. He begins his analysis with the prison system and expands considerations of disciplinary power to a model of control of society. Disciplinary power pervades societal institutions, including prisons, hospitals, schools, corporate organizations, social services, and families. The primary function of disciplinary power is to prohibit and correct deviant behaviors. It is a power as much concerned with what has not been done (nonobservance) as with what has (meeting societal standards); therefore, agency is firmly controlled by societal pressures.

Disciplinary power shapes a docile body and punishes those bodies that are undisciplined by training the body and therefore society. Disciplinary power trains through three main tools of control: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination. I will define the docile body and then explain how it is created through the use of these three tools.

Docile Bodies

Docile bodies are supremely efficient and act with minimum disruption and objection to societal norms. Foucault (1977) writes,

In short, it disassociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses

the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. (p. 138)

At Scholastic Middle, like most schools, the docile body of the student is one who sits quietly, focuses on work, and participates appropriately (i.e. raising one's hand, answering questions directly, not challenging the teacher in ways considered inappropriate). This ubiquitous training is naturalized, so the behavior of a good student is not seen as a system of rules imposed on a body that are not natural to it and perhaps even antithetical to how a child, tween, or teen's body should be expected to behave. Through discipline, routinized bodily behaviors and actions (being quiet and still) come to be seen as what the body does naturally when an individual behaves. In contrast to the docile body, the undisciplined body is one that refuses to do these things. This body is punished, but it must first be identified.

Hierarchical Observation

Discipline is enabled only when the undisciplined body is identified through observation, normalization, and examination. In a disciplinary society one is always under the impression one is being observed. "The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation" (p. 170). General visibility (theoretically addressed through the example of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison) makes the individual known. The Panopticon operates "to transform individuals; to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them" (Foucault, 1977, p. 172).

Bodies living in a state of permanent yet unverifiable visibility brings about the ultimate control of the disciplinary society—self-discipline. The automatic functioning of power is assured because docility has been internalized. The individual's docility and utility are maximized with minimum effort through the assumptive fear of constant surveillance.

The students of Scholastic Middle are observed throughout the school day. What they say, how they say it, how they stand or sit, their facial expressions, how they wear their uniforms—all are aspects of their behavior that are surveilled (and presumed to be surveilled) by school officials. Students are disciplined not just to encourage attendance

to course tasks, but also to be acceptable citizens according to middle-class, white standards.

The students realize they are under surveillance by school and society in general. The efforts they make to “look good” are examples of self-surveillance in order to avoid punishment and gain reward from strangers. They attempt to look like acceptable members of consumer culture to garner care and respect. Discipline is internalized to the extent that they feel more respect for themselves when they follow the norms of looking good. This self-surveillance is an effect of normalizing judgment.

Normalizing Judgment

Disciplinary power relies on observation as well as normalizing judgment. Normalizing judgment acts as both penalty and reward. A high ranking is a reward for good behavior and successful exercise, while lowering of rank is a punishment for not performing appropriately. Exercise is key to this punishment, and discipline favors punishments that are exercise, that can be used to reform (Foucault, 1977, p. 179). Students at Scholastic Middle are both punished and exercised for bad grades by being given extra study hall periods in place of extracurricular activities. This punishment also serves to normalize good grades.

Normalizing is a mechanism of value; it establishes a good versus bad dichotomy (Foucault, 1977, p. 181). Foucault says, “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (1977, p. 183). We are encouraged to behave appropriately out of a desire for reward. Rewards are just as powerful, if not more powerful, than a desire not to be punished (p. 180). The motivation for normalcy—achieving reward and avoiding punishment—can be held at any level (discursive, practical, or unconscious) of consciousness. Rewards and gaining rank are treated as normal. Often these rewards and punishments are the result of an examination of some sort.

Examination

Bringing together hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment is the most ritualized aspect of training the disciplined body—examination via a dialectic of visibility

of the subject and invisibility of power (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). Examinations are frequent at Scholastic Middle, and not just as course tests. The students' behaviors are examined and marked passable (docile) or flawed (undisciplined). Docile bodies are rewarded with praise or a lack of discipline. When flawed, students are given exercises (like extra study hall periods) to improve their behavior. These exercises vary, but all have the same goal—reform.

Foucault's (1977) disciplinary power is enacted through the training of the docile body. This body is limited and coerced through its training into behaving as the structure demands. For Foucault, operating outside of the discourse created by discipline is largely impossible. Power restricts and alters will, making an individual want to behave according to the rules of the system at practical and unconscious levels (Giddens, 1986). Agency is altered in such subtle and ubiquitous ways as to make agency or will itself altered.

Foucault and Giddens see the concept of altered will versus agency differently. Although their theories utilize different terminology and ideology, they are not incompatible. In fact, as the next section details, they are complimentary when it comes to consumer culture, identity, and the marginalized group of poor, minority, urban tweens.

Docile Bodies as Structural Agents

Where Foucault's views on agency are limited and perhaps limiting, Giddens's structuration theory (1986) has been accused of granting too much power to individuals (Archer, 1982, 1995, 1997; Willmott, 1999). Both theories recognize, although to different extents, that human beings are both actors and acted upon. For Giddens, agency is the ability to have done otherwise, nothing more or less. Foucault's techniques of discipline make doing otherwise highly regulated and undesirable, though not impossible. Also, both theorists point out the limitations of individual knowledge. These limitations are especially detrimental for those outside of the dominant group and discourse, because they can be used as the basis for punishment for veering from the status quo.

Like Giddens's practical consciousness (1986), Foucault says the docile body is created "not simply at the level of consciousness, of representations and in what one

thinks one knows, but at the level of what makes possible the knowledge that is transferred into political investment” (Foucault, 1977, p. 185). This level of knowledge largely exists in practical and discursive knowledge. Although practical knowledge can be reflected upon and challenged at the discursive level, the barrier between practical and unconscious knowledge makes these motivations toward docility difficult, if not impossible, to question. Thus, both theorists acknowledge the difficulty of reasoned resistance to societal structures. Not only do structures have a self-preserving bias, but we are also often unaware of all the structures by which we are confined. We are likely to act in ways that perpetuate current power structures because of a combination of a lack of awareness of the structures that enable, confine, and define us; our need for ontological security; and the intertwined activities of self-surveillance, normalizing judgment, and examination, all of which make routinization and regulation preferable.

The tweens at Scholastic Middle use the resources of consumer culture to deal with Foucault’s (1977) trap of visibility in order to create “normal” identities. They cannot completely or consistently access their positions in the various systems that confine them, however, because of the limitations of invisibility of power (Foucault, 1977) and discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1986). Their decisions perpetuate their individuality and delinquency (in Foucault’s terminology) when they buy, and buy into, stereotypical name brands and fashion choices and when they do not. Given these constraints and limitations how do poor, minority, urban tweens, or anyone for that matter, learn to navigate the structures and disciplines that surround them?

Habitus and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu’s (1984) concepts of “habitus” and “cultural capital” directly address these knowledges and lack thereof in the realm of class and consumption. We learn about the structures of society from our families and communities. Our families and communities provide us with our habitus, our dispositions toward things (food, clothing, relaxation, etc.) that lead us to make particular choices (Bourdieu, 1984). The tweens at Scholastic Middle make choices about how to look or behave based on what they have learned from their families and communities, learning they refer to as “home training.”³¹

³¹ Further discussed in chapter 7.

The knowledge gained from the tweens' particular habitus is their cultural capital. However, their decisions are based on "faulty" information from the point of view of the dominant classes. From the perspective of the dominant classes, the tweens cannot perform appropriately because they do not have the knowledge—the cultural capital—with which to make "better" decisions. Those with dominant, and therefore more powerful, cultural capital do not respect the tweens' non-dominant cultural capital (see Carter, 2003). The tweens' consumption decisions mark them as undisciplined bodies identified for either further training or delinquent, hedonistic status. Similarly Gramsci's concept of hegemony shows:

All social relations involve power. One consequence of this is the fact that how subalterns see the world is in part a product of their subordinate and dominated position. Their world-view necessarily comes into being in the context of lives lived in conditions of subordination and of hegemonic accounts reflecting how the world appears from the perspective of society's dominant groups. (Crehan, 2002, p. 116)

Like everyone's, the tweens' worldview is limited.³² However, unlike those in power, the limitations of their worldview can be used to punish them for falling away from the hegemonic status quo. It is partially this lack of a habitus imbued with dominant cultural capital that leads to what can be called delinquent or abnormal (Foucault, 1977) or spoiled or stigmatized (Goffman, 1963) identities.

Although they are unfounded, these critiques have material consequences and are the basis that dominant culture provides young Black children for the formation of identity. They are some of the most individual, and therefore delinquent, members of society in Foucault's terminology. As such, they are closely observed by members of society (such as store security) and are represented in the media as undisciplined identities. Although they have a great deal of knowledge and non-dominant cultural capital provided by their families and communities, this knowledge does not translate

³² Though a limited view and one not respected in many settings where the dominant discourse reigns, their non-dominant cultural capital should not be understood as having no cultural capital (Carter, 2003).

into docile bodies and identities. Instead, they are seen as delinquent and must find ways to navigate this stigma (Goffman, 1963).

Disidentifications

Individuals whose identities are seen as delinquent because of their race, class, and taste engage in various strategies to combat both negative images and the material consequences of punishment by the majority. Many, if not all, of these strategies are learned through the non-dominant habitus, which models ways to promote not only group identification and therefore social support but also ego protection (Carter, 2003). Munoz (1999) calls these strategies “disidentifications,” and writes,

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. (p. 4)

Disidentification allows minority subjects to enact identities that “work with/resist the conditions of (impossibility) that dominant culture generates” (p. 6). Disidentification can be understood as remembering and seeing what we need for our own self-formation, even when that reading does not match that of dominant culture. For example, the students of Scholastic Middle work to “look good” to counteract assumptions about themselves and their families as delinquent (Foucault, 1977) and spoiled (Goffman, 1963) identities. This is a mode of disidentification—neither identifying nor counteridentifying with the dominant culture.

Munoz (1999) adds disidentification to identification and counteridentification as a third mode of subject construction by ideological practices. In disidentification, neither assimilation nor strict opposition takes place:

Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact

permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday structures of resistance. (Munoz, 1999, p.11-12)

The tweens operate within this complex space between the dominant and non-dominant cultures they inhabit. To enact disidentification people must use their agency to interact with the rules and resources of the systems that surround them, in ways that challenge and destabilize this structure.

Munoz (1999) is primarily talking about individuals who are negotiating more than one minority identity at a time (particularly queers of color), but the idea is useful for looking at the ways the students of Scholastic Middle resist rules and categories. The tweens are very much caught within and between the stereotypes that all but mythologize them, their families, friends, and neighbors. They are caught between family, peer, and community cultures; the expectations of consumer culture; and their own aspirations molded partly by differing horizons, as they inhabit the white, middle-class space of school and the opportunities (and limitations) it presents.

Structuration (Giddens, 1986) and discipline (Foucault, 1977) are both theories that attempt to explain the grand structures that organize social life and their effects on individuals. Bourdieu (1984) and Munoz (1999) offer clarification in their concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and disidentification to flesh out the ways that agents are enabled and constrained in society. Key to the ways individuals operate in the world is identity. Although identity has been addressed in various ways thus far, it is now necessary to focus on its particular relationship to consumer culture and poor, minority, urban tweens.

Consumer Culture and Identity

This section addresses how contemporary ways of being affect the creation of identity in a consumer culture. Identity has both personal and social dimensions (see Dittmar, 2008; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Jenkins, 1996), meaning that it is both a subjective evaluation of how a person feels about or views herself as well as how she believes others see and feel about her. Like structure and agency, the personal and social are in constant interplay, one always affecting the other. Identity is multifaceted and includes various and diverse qualities, even material objects, (see Dittmar, 2008; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; W. James, 2007; Jenkins, 1996). Although most commonly thought of

as an aspect of agency, identity is directly connected to the structures and disciplines surrounding an individual. This discussion addresses the plurality of identity in late modern social life; how consumer culture contributes to this plurality; and the ways performance theory informs understandings of public and private identity display, especially as it concerns stigma and poor, minority, urban youth.

Financial resources broaden the range of social identities available to us. Many, if not most, consumer choices are class-based because of the wide gap in resources between the rich and poor. Products are marketed and bought based on class affiliation and identity. Consumers are formed in a class hierarchy based on the set of expectations and products of their class (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2000).

Wealthy people have a wider array of consumer options available through which to define themselves including: homes, lawns, education, travel, exclusive restaurants, cars, and personal appearance enhancements such as designer clothing, grooming, and more advanced beautification technologies. Because the poor have limited or no access to many of these status symbols, they focus on more attainable desires like clothing and body modification (Chin, 2001; Kotlowitz, 1999, 2000; Quart, 2003).

Clothing is a key component of personal appearance and identity display. Crane (2000) writes that as the first widely available consumer item, clothes have often served as an indulgence for all class levels. Garments comprise a symbolic system that indicate to us the personal, social, political, and economic identity of the wearer (Calfeto, 2004; Chin, 2001). Chin (2001) details the history of slavery and clothing, showing that historically clothing had special importance for African-Americans. It was one of the few consumer items slaves could afford to buy when allowed to work for wages (only a percentage of which they were allowed to keep). Also, given the prevalent practice of white owners raping slaves, skin color was often not a clear indicator of race. Therefore, the shabbiness and inadequacy of slave clothing sometimes served as a clearer indication of slave status than skin color. Through clothing, many aspects of identity and status are communicated, and so if one already had lighter skin buying nicer clothing helped remove another marker of slave status (Chin, 2001).

Clothing is one item inexpensive enough for the poor to consume. However, they cannot consume all forms of clothing, nor can they necessarily consume enough at a time or often enough, or from the “right” retailers to build adequate wardrobes in terms of the norms created by consumerism (Quart, 2003; Turner-Bowker, 2001). In addition, grooming standards (hair cuts, coloring, enhancements, and replacement; teeth whitening & orthodontia; laser or waxing hair removal), body modifications through diets, gym memberships, anti-wrinkle creams, all manner of plastic surgery, and use of technology (lap tops, MP3 players, cell phones)³³ are increasingly used by the middle-classes. A lack of these goods may lead to a class designation of poor or working class (see Quart, 2003).

The effects of the outward signs of consumer identity are not limited to others’ perceptions; they also play a key role in marking an individual to herself. The ability and knowledge to consume “appropriately” indicate the moral and social worthiness of an individual. U.S. consumer society offers many, varied, and expanding ways for an individual to create her identity and demands that she does so. However, as has been hinted at by the visible nature of many goods, personal identity is not the only aspect of self created through consumption. Social connection among individuals and groups is also enabled and constrained through consumption. The artifacts that help create and maintain consumer identity also help us to forge connections with other people through identification. For example, Chin (2001) found that knowledge of toys and TV shows provided kids subjects to talk about and bond over in the lunchroom (see also Pugh, 2009). Students unaware of popular shows or toys are less active in these types of social bonding rituals.

In summary, consumption helps to form personal and social identities. Commodities form the public, visual aspects of identity and largely control the performance of that identity. Commodities help us to identify one another and to know how to proceed in interactions. In a world where we are often in new situations with new individuals, commodities help to signal the rules and provide the resources for different

³³ It may seem odd to consider these technologies as marking the body, but given their ubiquitousness and mobility, they mark the body of the carrier or wearer in more and more places and spaces as their use becomes further enabled by technological means such as wireless internet access in public and private venues and the social acceptability of their nearly constant use.

routines in various regions (Goffman, 1959). For instance, how I react to a well-groomed man dressed in an expensive suit knocking on my window in a parking garage is likely different than a man who appears homeless based on his clothing and grooming. I can pull from both discursive and practical knowledge based on the commodities on display about the type of person trying to get my attention. I am attempting to read the individual's performance of self for clues as to our social connections and the likely rules of this situation.

Performing Consumer

Key to consumer culture at large and especially to the display of identity to others through consumer goods is performance. One performs his or her identity through appearance and actions within the rules and resources of the structures in any given situation or setting. Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management finds that identity is created and maintained in front stage public life through tools and strategies that the social actor employs with others. Impression management is a way that agents mark themselves within the resources and constraints of consumer structure, thereby reinscribing the system. There is much conscious and unconscious work that goes into intentionally portraying one's self, and thus creating a stable and coherent identity.

Identity or persona is developed as a function of interaction with others, through an exchange of information that allows for more specific definitions of identity and behavior. The process of establishing social identity, then, becomes closely allied to the concept of "front," which is described as "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define a vehicle of standardization, allowing for others to understand the individual on the basis of projected character traits that have normative meanings" (Goffman, 1959, p. 27). In order to present a compelling front, the actor is forced to both fill the duties of the social role and communicate the activities and characteristics of the role to other people consistently. The importance of impression management is greater for individuals and groups accorded lesser status.

The front, or public, is a "collective representation," which establishes proper "setting," "appearance," and "manner" for the social role assumed by the actor, uniting interactive behavior with the personal front (Goffman, 1959, p. 27). Attempts are made to

present an “idealized” version of the front, one which is consistent with the norms and laws of society as opposed to the behavior of the actor when not before an audience (p. 35). This behavior is based on both discursive and practical knowledge of the routines of a particular region. Through routinization actors know how to behave appropriately in the front stage (Goffman, 1959). Information about aberrant behavior and belief is concealed from the audience in a process of “mystification,” which makes prominent socially sanctioned characteristics and legitimates both the social role of the individual and the framework to which the role belongs (p. 67). Moving all actions not appropriate for the audience to the “back” region enables mystification. The back region, or back stage, is defined as “where the impression fostered by the [front] performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (p. 112). In this region, a private space, the individual is free to drop pretense and the team is free to interact with one another on the level deemed fitting for them versus the interaction appropriate for the audience.

An individual’s identity can be seen in both the expression that the performer “gives,” his or her verbalizations and intended, conscious communication, and the expression that the performer “gives off,” all other unconscious communication used by the performer which includes non-verbal signals that may communicate unintended information (Goffman, 1959). Here Goffman cues us into the possibilities for the non-verbal—the “giving off.” Should the verbal message and non-verbal message conflict with one another, an audience member is more likely to believe the latter. This has great ramifications for understanding how individuals’ identities are constructed and contested in a consumer society. How a person is adorned can contradict and discount the class identity impression intended by the deliberate actions of the individual. The agency of the individual is greatly limited by the structural and disciplinary components influencing the meanings associated with consumer goods. The power of signification given to consumer goods leaves those without the means to appropriately consume, according to the norms of a consumer culture, at a significant disadvantage in their identity performances. However, this disadvantage does not prohibit alternative uses and displays of consumer culture, disidentification (Munoz, 1999) is still possible and something that the tweens in

this study work toward through looking good, taking care, and subverting the rules of the system.

Successful impression management is based not only on the appropriateness of the goods displayed but also on their use and the context of their display. These knowledges are learned through “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984, 2008). A subset of identity construction, especially important to impression management, is stigma formation and management. Goffman’s work on stigma (1963) is the basis for much of the work on stigma in sociology and communication. Goffman’s discussion of the strategies of passing and covering and individual, social, and group identification is useful in understanding the way the stigma of being unable to conspicuously consume is negotiated.

As Ellis (1998) notes in her work on minor bodily stigmas, stigma is experienced subjectively rather than objectively. It is both individual and social. Sedgwick (2003) writes, “That’s the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (p. 37). In addition, Sedgwick (2003) notes that unlike guilt, which is attached to action, shame is attached to a sense of self. Shame makes you feel inferior as an individual in relation to the standard you believe others are meeting. You are conditioned to feel it as a member of society, yet you are not supposed to feel it. One is ashamed of being ashamed, creating metashame (Ellis, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Scheff, 2003; Sedgwick, 2003). This shame and metashame are the result of not conforming to the rules of being a docile body (Foucault, 1977). One is not performing efficiently and appropriately within the structure.

The key to effective performances of self in a consumer culture is access to consumption and upper class rules or habitus of consumption. Stigma is attached to individuals who do not have the resources to consume or to consume according to models other than those of the middle and upper classes. One cannot adequately build an identity without access to consumer goods. Whether one cannot identify herself sufficiently as a docile body or one’s performances of self are flawed by a lack of access to consumer goods or “faulty” decision making regarding consumption, one cannot identify oneself without access to and an understanding of consumer culture. Without these consumer

knowledges provided by the dominant habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Carter, 2003) or the consumer goods provided by economic means, one runs afoul of normalizing judgment and is deemed delinquent (Foucault, 1977). Consumption is the constraint and enabler, rule and resource, of the consumer culture system. Although nearly all agents are able to act by consuming at some level of the consumer system, for those stigmatized by race and/or class, their resources, both fiscally and socially, are deeply inadequate (delinquent, spoiled, abnormal) to adhere to proper routines of the system. Theirs is a consumerism of desire and denial.

The importance of consumption in identity formation and social connection in U.S. culture is made most salient through the combination of consumer culture and late modernism, or a move away from previous, more fixed, models of identity formation. A foremost identity of consumer (Bauman, 2005) places a particular strain on the poor. Bauman says,

In a consumer society however, having no access to a happy or merely a normal life means to be consumers *manquees*, or flawed consumers. And so the poor of a consumer society are socially defined, and self-defined, first and foremost as blemished, defective, faulty and deficient—in other words, inadequate—consumers. (2005, p. 38)

To consume adequately is to have a worthy identity and self, to be someone who has merit, character, or value in society.³⁴ In our current consumer culture (Bauman, 2005), new consumption (Schor, 1998), or conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/1994), we live in a society where our identities and social place are revealed to others and ourselves through consumption. “Normal life” is flaunted by the marketing and conspicuous consumption of consumer goods. Constructed depictions of “normal” and normalizing judgment create a desire to consume. The relationship of desire and denial is cruel for the poor, because as these consumer desires are realized or discovered they are

³⁴ This logic of good people, consumers, and citizens is clear when listening to government rhetoric concerning the economy and economic crisis. We are asked to spend to save our country and world economies. If our duty is to spend, then one who has no money to spend would logically not be fulfilling their civic duty, would not be worthy of the title of good citizen. The government goes so far as to give us “stimulus checks” as tax rebates so we will do our duty and jumpstart the economy with our spending.

simultaneously recognized as unreachable (Allison, 1994, 1996; hooks, 2000). This denial can be especially hard on adolescent consumers, as they are both relatively new to these decisions and realizations and are in an especially turbulent time concerning identity formation.

Youth and Consumer Culture

Poor, minority, urban youth are seeking to create their identities along with everyone else within this consumer culture. Chin (2001) notes that much of the consumption literature assumes a middle-class income.³⁵ Often the inability to meet consumer needs, let alone desires (this dichotomy itself a messy and value-laden distinction for social beings in a consumer culture), is not discussed. There is even less literature focused on poverty and tweens. However, there is some work that applies directly to the topic of poor, urban, minority youth and consumer culture.

In “The Dichotomous Child in a Consumer Culture” (2005), Cook argues that much of the literature on children in general, including that linking them to consumer culture, operates with the ideology that the social being of the child is either exploited or empowered. The problem with viewing children as purely exploited by manipulative marketers (i.e., the pawns of structure) is that it does not account for a child’s agency in consumer contexts (Cook, 2005). When researchers believe children lack agency, they do not examine the ideas, meaning making systems, or interpretations of children. Particularly problematic to the view of urban youth as lacking agency is that it ignores the ways tweens influence marketers, particularly in the fashion industry (see Gladwell, 2000).

As opposed to seeing children as exploited social beings, notions of the “empowered” child see children as unencumbered by structural constraints and resources or knowledges stored in practical consciousness or the unconscious (Cook, 2005). This view promotes asking children, tweens, and teens about their own identity constructions and regards them as fully knowledgeable and articulate about their own likes and dislikes,

³⁵ One need only listen to the morning news/talk shows flaunting fashion or home “must-haves” for “every budget” to see that the poor are virtually erased in the rhetoric of consumption. When a \$60 (or \$250) “steal” of a dress is spoken of as one anyone can afford, the many women who live lives where a new dress at \$10 is unlikely or even impossible are rhetorically eliminated from existing.

motivations, and influence on and from the social world. It assumes all consumer knowledge and motivation is located in discursive consciousness. In addition, such a view provides moral cover and justification for direct marketing to children. Most companies that market children's products agree, at least publicly, that "an active, knowing, desirous child is essential to business" (Cook, 2005, p. 156). This child thrives on and controls consumer culture and has the agency and ability to reject harmful or undesirable behavior and products.

The use of structuration theory in studying the consumer lives and understandings of youth is one way to avoid this structural/agential dichotomy. A vision of the child as enabled and constrained by consumer culture as well as influencing the rules and resources of the structures that create consumer culture emerges by seeing structure and agency as always implicated within one another and never fully separable. As Cook and Kaiser (2004) state,

Ultimately, this agency [that of tween girls in this case, but this can be expanded to tween boys as well] cannot be separated from the marketplace and the cultural spaces it generates—strategically, ambiguously. (p. 206)

Cook (2005) calls for research on children in the everyday moments of their lives, arguing that their consumption will best be understood through these actions:

The consumer self . . . does not arise solely from within or solely from without, but in the interaction between the 'inside' and 'outside'. We become selves partly through consumption just as consumption—the goods, meanings, spaces, images and relationships thereby forged with others—becomes part of us. (Cook, 2005, p. 158; see also Chin 1993, 2001)

The continuum of the exploited child and the empowered child set out by Cook (2005) combined with Giddens's structuration theory (1986) and informed by discipline (Foucault, 1977), cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), impression management (Goffman, 1959), stigma (Goffman, 1963), and disidentification (Munoz, 1999) can offer an organizing device by which various social science perspectives of the consumer selves of low income adolescents can be viewed. We can look at the work of Schor (2004), Gladwell (2000), Autio (2004), Pugh (2009), Kotlowitz (1991, 1999, 2000),

Chin (2001), and Nightingale (1993) along a continuum of agency to structure to see where they place the emphasis in their understandings of the consumer selves of low-income youth. By situating these works within the continuum of agency and structure, we also see what is missing from the current research.

Far to the agent side of the spectrum, marketers purport that children and teens are pure or nearly pure agents. As mentioned above, the image of the empowered child gives marketers carte blanche to sell to whomever, whenever, and however they please. As Schor (2004)³⁶ outlines in *Born to Buy*, marketers depend on children not only as consumers but also as innovators to help them sell and create products.

Gladwell (2000) accounts for another similar aspect of marketing—the coolhunt. The coolhunter’s job is to find the cool, urban kids and ask them what they think about different styles and products. However, once they tap into the creativity and innovation of what the cool kids are doing, this knowledge goes into the corporation that mass markets the product, image, or identity, making it uncool and overdone. Once what was cool becomes mainstream, something else becomes cool and the cycle begins again. Thus, the fashion cycle is in constant flux, demonstrating both what Gladwell refers to as the “first rule of cool”—“the quicker the chase, the quicker the flight” (p. 361) and the role of constant change in the consumer system. Both Schor (2004) and Gladwell (2000) address the ways that the structure not only demands a docile body but also has ways of taking innovation (even innovation that is subversion or rejection of discipline) and incorporating it back into the structure.

Autio (2004) is not a marketing researcher, but takes a heavily agential stance in the study of teens and consumer culture. In her work with Finnish youth, she asked students to write essays about their consumer identities. Then, using their titles and descriptions, she teases out identity constructions most salient to the teens themselves. She found that,

Young Finnish people are representing their identity as consumers through a combination of various levels of consumer discourse besides hedonism and

³⁶ Schor (2004) and Gladwell (2000) are exploring the work and conceptions of marketers selling to children. They are not purporting that children are fully empowered, only reporting on those who do (marketers).

squandering: rationalizing and economizing are essential parts of their process of forming identities as consumers. Some youngsters present themselves as responsible consumer including ecological and ethical choices as part of their narrative. (Autio, 2004, p. 389)

Autio's themes offer an idea of how traditional ideas (such as economy) and contemporary ideas (such as pleasure or luxury) of consumption can mesh together despite their incongruity in youthful identities. Although Finnish youth are by no means a doubly marginalized culture, they are still using the strategies working with and resisting both contemporary and traditional ideas of consumption. They are using the strategy of disidentification (Munoz, 1999) to create livable consumer identities within conflicting structural and disciplinary frameworks.

Pugh (2009) studied both children's consumption and parents' consumption for children in both affluent and low-income schools. Pugh addresses the ways consumer culture infiltrates the child/parent relationship and focuses her analysis on children's "economy of dignity." In this economy, dignity is created and maintained through the use and knowledge of consumer goods and popular culture. Parents understand this dignity as important to their children's acceptance within peer groups and thus buy items for their children that are part of this economy. Pugh argues that poorer parents focus on what they do provide for their children while wealthier parents focus on "symbolic deprivation" or what they do not buy for their children. Both children's and parents' agency is confined within the structure of consumer culture.

Chin (1993, 1999, 2001) and Kotlowitz (1991, 1999, 2000) also clearly frame agency as constrained by the structural components of consumption and society. Both set out to show the effects of the interplay of agency and structure through their youth and adolescent participants. They seek to account for areas of agency not seen in mainstream renderings of poor, Black, urban children, tweens, and teens and to destabilize taken-for-granted notions of agency.

In his extensive fieldwork with two brothers who reside in the Henry Horner Homes, a public housing development on Chicago's West Side, Kotlowitz witnesses the various constraints and resources in the boys' lives (Kotlowitz, 1991, 1999, 2000).

Kotlowitz juxtaposes the lives of the teens in the Henry Horner Homes, those “inhabitants [who] have become geographically and spiritually isolated from all that surrounds them” (1999, p. 66), with the white, middle-class teens who share their sense of fashion. Kotlowitz argues that it is through the literally manufactured connections of fashion that middle-class, white, suburban youth and poor, Black, inner-city youth connect. As such, they are connected as consumers, rather than as citizens or human beings.

Like Kotlowitz, Chin (2001) falls into this middle ground between agency and structure. Chin (1993, 1999, 2001) spent two years doing an ethnographic study with 10-year-olds in Newhallville, Connecticut in order to overcome the understandings of Black children as being devoted to hedonistic consumer desires for name brand status symbols. She spoke to these children about and observed them in moments of consuming, connecting these moments to both their everyday lives and larger social, political, and historical processes. She writes,

Class, race, and gender differences in consumption cannot be attributed simply to neutralizing notions of product preferences or shopping habits, individual likes and dislikes. Rather, these differences may instead be viewed as being in large part expressions of or responses to structural oppression, which is itself often created and enforced through consumer channels. (Chin, 2001, p. 4)

Clearly in line with structuration theory, Chin believes, “consumer culture is a medium through which multiple oppressions are brought to bear on people’s lives in enduring and intimate ways” (2001, p. 175). She found that although the children are not untouched by the desire for brand name shoes and toys, a larger ethic of practicality, caring, and connection underlies their purchasing behaviors and consumer outlook. Her account shows that her participants are both constrained by the consumer system and use its resources to act back on it in ways not officially sanctioned by its rules.

Nightingale (1993) accords more power to structure than the previous authors. Nightingale’s (1993) work, *On the edge: A history of poor black children and their American dreams*, offers a historical perspective mixed with contemporary ethnographic excerpts to provide an explanation for black, urban, teen consumer consciousness. This

work provides extensive context of the systems of poverty and racism as they relate to inner-city youth consumption. There are many individual examples of youth making decisions about consumption, which are utilized to explain the impact of larger systems of poverty, racism, and consumer culture on inner-city youth. For Nightingale, the decisions an individual is able to make are so narrow that agency has virtually no role in the identities of poor, Black, urban teens.

Together, Schor (2004), Gladwell (2000), Autio (2004), Kotlowitz (1991, 1999, 2000), Chin (1993, 1999, 2001), and Nightingale (1993) offer us a look at the aspects of agency and structure as treated with more or less weight in the depictions of the consumer selves of low-income adolescents. Each of these studies offers a piece of the picture of the consumer identities of low-income, minority, inner-city youth and how these identities affect their lived experience. They each attend to the duality of structure and agency (Giddens, 1986), and with varying emphasis the force of discipline (Foucault, 1977), the role of habitus, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), stigma, and spoiled identities (Goffman, 1963), in negotiating these structures, and the various forms those negotiations take, including impression management (Goffman, 1959) and disidentification (Munoz, 1999).

My study falls closest to Chin's (1993, 1999, 2001) work. Her work is critical and works to consistently situate the choices participants are making as necessarily constrained. She most clearly balances structure and agency in the ways I see the tweens of Scholastic Middle enacting it. Also, this work follows her recommendation to study "typical" urban environments rather than the poorest and/or most violent areas of the U.S. Where this study differs is the age of the participants and the use of individual, in-depth interviews. First, where Chin focused on children around 10-years-old, I focus on tweens between 10 to 14-years-old, with the majority of my interviews coming from the eighth graders who are 13 to 14-years-old. I focus on this population because I am interested in how individuals who are newly, relatively independent (i.e., they make many of their own purchasing decisions with oversight by those providing the money and take shopping trips on their own) make consumer decisions. The use of interviews allows me to access their discursive knowledge regarding their consumer decisions in their own

words as well as providing the opportunity to question some of their practical knowledge, perhaps moving it to the discursive level of consciousness. Second, this study differs from many in that it does focus on a “typical” urban environment, but it does not focus on a typical school environment. This study focuses on the students of Scholastic Middle—a unique institution and philosophy—which provides me and the tweens with a different perspective on the ways race, class, education, and ideas of opportunity are connected.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have worked to situate contemporary life as rooted in late modernity where a future-oriented progress narrative and plethora of choices regarding constructions of self fit into the agendas of marketing and consumer culture. I have also argued for consumer culture as a structure in Giddens’s (1986) sense of the term. This structure both enables and constrains the individuals/agents who live within it. It also serves to discipline us (Foucault, 1977). Both of these theories mark out the territory in which the tweens in this study negotiate their identities—identities which consumer culture provides the most important resource for negotiating. Theories of impression management and stigma (Goffman, 1959, 1963), habitus, reconversion strategies, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), and disidentification (Munoz, 1999) provide insight into the ways this is negotiated. I have also focused on previous work (Autio, 1993; Chin, 1993, 1999, 2001; Cook, 2005; Kotlowitz, 1991, 1999, 2000; Nightingale, 1993; Pugh, 2009) that places poor, minority, urban, tweens in consumer culture. What the intersections of these various theories and empirical works enable is the ability to see individuals as both acting and acted upon in consumer culture. It is a foundation for a complex analysis of the ways the tweens at Scholastic Middle use consumer culture both discursively and practically to show care for themselves and their families and to subvert the rules and routines of school.

As much as I have learned from the research profiled in this chapter, the most influential theorists to this work are the tweens themselves. As such, the following chapter is dedicated to them, to an understanding of their locale, families, and personalities.

Chapter 5

Where We From: Setting the Lived Scene

A Coat of Arms

“Everyone take a seat,” Ms. Curtis’s voice drifts over the heads of the eighth grade girls as they slowly move to the stools at the high lab tables. As the students sit down, the teacher draws a shield with four areas—a center, bottom right, bottom left, and full arch along the top—on the white board. In the center, she draws a tree, which represents the Scholastic Middle logo. The drawing on the board is similar to the handouts being passed around.

“Both you and the eighth grade boys will be going on camping trips soon. We have a lot of activities planned for you, and the shields you have here will factor into one of them. What you are holding is a coat of arms.” Ms. Curtis goes on to explain how medieval European soldiers and knights in war wore coats of arms to identify them as soldiers and show their family histories. These coats of arms were important symbols of identity that showed a soldier’s past, present, and future.

Ms. Curtis continues, “You each have the Scholastic Middle symbol in the middle to show your school family. You’ll place symbols in each of the other three sections. In the bottom left place a symbol of your past, in the bottom right a symbol of your present, and use the arc at the top to show your future. This next handout explains the meanings of many of the symbols that have traditionally been used in coats of arms. Also, it details the meanings of various colors. You’re welcome to use these symbols or to create your own.” With this the students get down to work.

After handing out acrylic paints, I sit down with Ianna, Cala, Rashona, and Kaia. Totally at home with both an art project and the freedom of direction they’ve been given, they get right to work. Rashona, true to her by-the-book nature, uses the handout and picks out the medieval symbols she thinks best fit her life. Focusing on the present section of her shield, she begins to carefully outline a candle. The handout says that a

candle represents light, life, and spirituality. I ask her why she chose it, and she responds, “Because family and church are important,” and immediately turns back to her drawing.

I turn to the other end of the table to see Cala drawing a picture in the past section of her shield of a family in front of a big house with trees all around. “Who is that?” I ask.

“My family—there’s my mom, my dad, and my older sister and my sister is holding my niece,” she replies. I know that Cala lives in an apartment and can think of no house in Tampa that would have as much space around it as she details in her drawing. I also know that her parents do not live together, although they are both very involved in her life. Given that this is the past section of her shield, I imagine that she is drawing a time when they all lived together. However, her niece is not very old and wouldn’t have been around when her parents were still living together. This family structure is a bit of fantasy on her part, and I assume the house is as well. Like most of us, the image of her past, which she identifies as making her who she is now, is perhaps not wholly accurate, though this makes it no less real for her.

Like Cala and Rashona, nearly every girl makes a strong and positive reference to their families somewhere on their shields. They draw pictures to symbolize their future college and career goals, to show the activities they enjoy now, and to pay homage to both the trials and support they feel brought them to this point. As the class goes on, I begin to notice that there is another trend that crosses the shields—there are no references to material goods or consuming. No brand logos, no fancy cars, no material objects at all with the exception of houses in the backgrounds of some of the pictures. At no time do they see consumer goods, let alone brands, as playing a significant part in their identities or lives.

Where We Live

This chapter serves to move this research from the theoretical locale from which I originally conceived many of my research questions to the lived locale of the tweens who gave their time and energy to answer, and often change, my questions. First, I will address the area of the city where the school is located and then talk about one of the

areas where many of the students live. Next, I will talk about each of the 25 students I interviewed.

As I come off the highway, the great eight-lane transport marvel that not only bisects the entire city but also keeps you from actually having to traverse it, be in it, or see it, I exit onto a road I've never been on. It leads me down a two-way street that becomes one way as it provides a straight shot through a residential neighborhood. The homes appear old and relatively small, butted right up against the sidewalk and road. The bungalows appeal to me because of their architecture, but they clearly need repair. A few are in better shape and the better-looking ones have for sale signs. As I drive, I both admire and lament the neighborhood. I'm attracted to the houses and the history of the area, but hate the condition that it's in. I wonder if it is possible to live in and feel a connection with a run-down neighborhood seemingly abandoned by city planners and not feel a bit run-down and abandoned yourself.

As I pull up to a red light, I see a large brick building and a basketball pavilion surrounded by a tall wrought-iron fence. Since I'm looking for a school, the basketball courts make me look twice, even as I think the building isn't nearly big enough. Although I went to an elementary school smaller than this, I haven't seen any school in Tampa that couldn't hold this one five times over. However, as I pull away from the light I notice a bus bench that says, "Scholastic Middle. Now accepting scholarship applications." This leads me to take a chance and pull through the only opening in the gate surrounding the school into the parking lot.

Scholastic Middle is located in Casitas City,³⁷ a historic area and a community redevelopment area (CRA)³⁸ far west of much of Tampa's more recent sprawl; it is solidly part of the city. Its status as both historic and a CRA tells a lot about the area. It was originally both a factory town and a part of Tampa. Although always a part of

³⁷ Names for various areas of the city, roads, and other geographical locations and their directional locations from one another have been changed to protect anonymity for the school and all participants. The only area retaining its actual name is the University Community Area because it is not connected to the school and statistical information, which must be cited, is relevant.

³⁸ Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) is an area of the city in which special tax incentives are in place to revitalize it, and a Community Redevelopment Agency has been created to manage that tax money and the revitalization projects it supports.

Tampa, Casitas has its own look and a feel much different from most of the city. The Spanish-influenced architecture of Casitas was largely unappreciated and allowed to languish by the city for many years. In an attempt to revitalize the area, much of Casitas is now contained in two community redevelopment areas. CRA's are areas that are set aside to benefit from tax increment funds (TIF) and other incentives like ad valorem tax exemptions, transportation impact fee reductions, historic preservation tax credits, and enterprise zone tax credits (Florida Redevelopment Association, 2009) in the hope that these additional funds will allow for repair and attract investment therefore bettering the community.

Although sections of Casitas have been revitalized (or gentrified depending on the perspective taken) through the CRA and other programs, much of Casitas is still run-down. Its inhabitants are largely poor and of Latino and African-American descent. Given Scholastic Middle's mission to serve financially disadvantaged students who otherwise would not have access to quality, private school education, Casitas is an appropriate section of the city in which to be located.

However, the location of the school is just that for many of the kids who attend Scholastic Middle. Most do not live in the immediate area. Students at Scholastic Middle come from all over the city and surrounding suburbs. Given the immense sprawl of Tampa (like that of many Southern cities), some students move across a significant distance to attend school each day. Given that the school has no transportation system this means that students are either driven to school or take city busses.

However, whether or not they live in Casitas, many Scholastic Middle students live in similar areas around the city. It is these areas where much of their consumption and lives in general take place. Ridge Park, an area that once prospered as a cigar manufacturing community, now reminds its citizens of its past by abandoned, derelict cigar factories. Other low-income areas of the city are also home to many of the students. In particular, several of the eighth grade girls I worked with most lived in the area referred to by either those trying to be polite or those who don't know the area very well as the University Community Area. To its residents, the police, and most of Tampa, it is known as Suitcase City. Although many residents and community organizations have

tried to shake the negative label of Suitcase City, identification with the university remains farfetched given the condition of the area when compared with the manicured campus. Separated from the University of South Florida by no more than a major street, the kids who live there have a much smaller likelihood of ever crossing that street as university students than the official name for the area suggests.

Students often talked about the corner stores or bodegas in their neighborhoods as places they frequent. They also talked about playing or hanging out outside. Those descriptions of the University Area meant something to me, because it's where I live as well. It's an area where needles in a vacant lot are not uncommon and the vacant lot is virtually the only place to play other than the parking lots of apartment complexes. It's one of the most transient areas in the state, with up to 89 percent of the residents moving within any given year (Franklin, 2004). At the beginning and end of the day, the sidewalks are full of people walking to and from bus stops in their work uniforms. In a kind of reverse racial profiling, it is an area where myself, my white partner, and three of our white friends have been pulled over, with one having his car searched, for no discernable reason. I can only assume it's because they can't figure out why seemingly middle-class white people are driving around this neighborhood if they're not there to buy drugs. And we are the exception. The condominium complex where I live is one of the few owned residences in the area. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the zip code has 54.9 percent rental-occupied units (compared with 33.8 percent for the country) and a median income of \$26,985 (compared with \$41,994 for the country) with 21.5 percent of individuals below the poverty level (compared with 12.4 percent for the country). It has high juvenile crime compared to better-off neighborhoods in the city (Brown, 2002). It is an area where more of my neighbors than not have had their homes broken into or had break-ins attempted. In all honesty, if it hadn't been for the home price boom in Florida, we and others who live in our complex likely would not have bought homes there.

However, it is also an area where I regularly walk my dogs at night and feel safe enough to do so. It's an area where I see kids and teens freely walking and joking. I have more than once seen Scholastic Middle students walking to the store with their friends and families. It is not a place in which most people of middle-class means would choose

to live. Tampa does not contain “ur-ghettos,” neighborhoods at the extreme end of poverty, the “nation’s most dramatically depressed areas” (Chin, 2001, p. 58-59), and these Scholastic Middle tweens do not live in them.

The kids at Scholastic Middle are universally poor and non-white and they live in poor areas. However, these areas are racially diverse (the University Area was 60 percent white during the 2000 census) and proximate to more affluent areas. Near its eastern border the, University Area contains one of the city’s major shopping malls. Another run-down area to the south contains a Busch Gardens amusement park. Likewise, sections of Scholastic Middle’s home, Casitas City, have been turned into tourist areas with high-end retailers, restaurants, and entertainment venues.

These are major differences in locale from the work most often done with the urban poor, which often takes place in the poorest, most dangerous, and depressed neighborhoods in the country (Bourgeois, 1995; Kotlowitz, 1991, 1999, 2000; MacLeod, 1987; Nightingale, 1993). Chin (2001) argues,

These sites effectively allow researchers to look at the reality behind popular images and to counteract them with carefully researched and reasoned accounts, but they have also, in a way, allowed dominant discourse to lay the boundaries of the inquiry. . . . it is precisely because they represent such extremes that these communities are heavily studied. Urban poverty has more faces, colors, and permutations than those seen in the nation’s most dramatically depressed areas. (p. 58-59)

The tweens in this project live in a complex and diverse metropolitan area, meeting Chin’s call to study more typical urban settings.

Thus far I have provided a great deal of information about the school, and now have covered the type of neighborhoods in which the students live. However, as much as tweens are influenced by their surroundings, they are individuals. As much as they are demographically lumped together by race, class, and geographic location, they are all incredibly different from one another. There is not one child at Scholastic Middle that I did not get the chance to observe and learn something from; however there were some

who gave so generously of their time and insight that they became the basis for this project. These boys and girls are the subject of the rest of this chapter.

The Participants

All things at Scholastic Middle happen according to grade: the eighth grade girls are in drama, or the fifth grade boys are sitting outside during lunch, or the seventh grade girls are going on a fieldtrip. School life is organized around the movement of these groups. Hence, it seems natural to me to break them down as such. Because I spent so much time with the eighth grade girls, I will profile them as a class and then individually describe each person. I also spent a great deal of time with the eighth grade boys so I will do the same with this group. Based on the impracticality of describing 100-plus students individually, I will limit my comments regarding students in the lower grades to only the students I interviewed.

Eighth Grade Girls

The eighth grade girls were the group with whom I became the most familiar. I attended most of their drama classes, often monitored their study halls, and worked with a lot of them in the school play. I know teachers and parents aren't supposed to have favorites, but I'm not sure about researchers. Supposed to or not, as a group they were my favorite because of their paradoxes. They were loud and contemplative, and classy and rude, put-together and a mess, wise and nonsensical. As a group they were both tight-knit and had a few loners. One thing I liked so much about their dynamic is that they allowed the loners, like Rashona and Kaia, to be alone when they wanted to be alone, but then allowed them into whatever they were doing when they wanted to be involved. Although bringing loners into the group often went smoothly, mending hurt feelings and friendships was not always so simple. Keeping the girls together was often the job of the fieriest of them, Jacynth.

Jacynth. Jacynth reminds me a bit of President Theodore Roosevelt's quote, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." She is as loud as anyone, but her softness comes in her desire and her efforts to keep the peace. When other girls would say mean things to each other, Jacynth would remind them that they had been friends and would be friends

for some time. However, if her kinder tactics didn't work, she had no problem switching to harsher comments such as, "shut up and listen."

Jacynth lives with her mom, dad, and two older sisters. She has a close relationship with her dad and a great respect for both her parents. As the youngest, she was eager to have her older sisters move out so she would have her parents, and their financial resources, to herself. However, this desire was tempered by her obvious affection for not only her sisters but also her several half-siblings.

Jacynth carries the confidence of royalty in the posture of a soldier, grace held within wiry toughness. Although she doesn't have the best grades, she is street and relationship smart. Despite her being 14, if she told me to do something, even something I wasn't sure about, I would consider it, as she generally knows what she's doing.

Cala. If Jacynth is black leather, Cala is pink, fuzzy slippers. She loves fashion and gossip and is very giving and nurturing. I first met her monitoring study hall. She went out of her way to share a new set of pretty pencils not only with her classmates but also with me. I still have the pencil decorated with monkeys and bananas. She always has the cutest school accessories, and she often kindly shares them with others.

Cala lives with her mother and 20-year-old sister and her sister's daughter. Although her father doesn't live with her, she referenced him frequently and he came to several school events. She also has two brothers who are older and live away from home.

I always looked forward to seeing Cala with her mom at school events. They made each other laugh heartily and continuously, and you couldn't help but be drawn in.

Cala's most frequent confidant is Ianna. While Cala looks young, Ianna sends off the vibe of a fully-grown woman—at least in terms of her physical appearance—and she enjoys the attention it brings her.

Ianna. She has shoulder-length, dark, straight hair and thick-rimmed black glasses. Ianna was one of the few girls in the eighth grade who seemed to be interested in boys and was dating Eldad, an eighth grade boy. I originally hoped to take some of the girls to the mall but actually abandoned that plan partly because of Ianna and Kabira's relationships with the eighth grade boys. The other girls talked often about them lying to their parents to meet the boys at the mall, and I didn't want to enable that plan.

Although flirty, Ianna doesn't get attention just for her looks. She is also one of the highest achieving girls in the eighth grade. She applied to some of the most prestigious private boarding high schools in the country and was accepted into more than one. She and Cala get along well, as do most of the girls, and one of their bonds is fashion and other "girliness," as some of the other girls would say.

Ianna lives with her mom, stepdad, and two younger sisters. Although the man she lives with is technically her stepdad, she continually referred to him as her father. One of her sisters is a fifth grader at Scholastic Middle.

Crystal. Ianna's polar opposite is Crystal. In the same study hall where Cala gave me a pencil, Crystal took something from Elois and managed to give Jacynth a busted lip. I had no idea what to do. She's a sturdy girl and asking her to stop didn't work. I wasn't sure I could physically do much if she decided to carry on and hurt someone else. Although I don't have exact details on her family life because she never brought in an interview consent form, I learned from our conversations that she lived with her twin sister and a younger brother. It seemed that she sometimes lived with her mother and sometimes her grandmother. I did learn from one of the teachers that both she and her twin applied to the school, but only she was accepted. As I spoke with teachers regarding her behavior that first day, many seemed to give her a pass. Given the level of discipline I had seen at the school up to this point, this was unexpected. Mr. Shah, one of the AmeriCorps teachers, said that her family life was hard and although her mom tried, it was hard for all of them.

I never got more detail than that, although Crystal came to be another of my favorite students. Not only did her behavior get better, but she also warmed up to me. Most of the students are open and chatty immediately, and, although I had no illusions about them spilling their darkest secrets to me, I did think of us as positive acquaintances, if not friends. It took Crystal a lot longer to warm up, but once she did I realized what I could have missed. Despite the roughhousing, she was one of the shyest girls in her class. Although all the kids thrived on positive attention from teachers and administrators when she was praised, Crystal's face would light up, a smile breaking across her entire face, even as she tried to act nonchalant. Partly because of this realization, and honestly

because I liked her so much, I lobbied hard for her to get a part in the play. She got it; she was great.

Elois. Elois is physically like Crystal and often just as prone to roughhousing, but much louder. Always in the middle of everything, she was one of the girls I most often had to implore to be quiet, sit down, or stop any number of things.

Elois has five older sisters and lives with her mom and dad close to the school in Castitas City. Although close enough to walk to school, she answered my question of why she didn't with an incredulous, "Why would I? I have four sisters at home that can pick me up." This kind of almost abrasive, but mostly funny matter-of-factness constituted most of her speech.

Elois came across as hard, but was one of the girls most integrated and social in her cohort.

Dedra. Dedra is especially important to Elois, who, despite the closeness of all the girls, is her best friend. Firmly ensconced with the boisterous girls, Dedra was one of the first students under suspicion when a loud snort or laugh interrupted the quiet of a room. She is easily distracted from both work and play and quick to laugh. She is the only girl in her class who makes apologizing a significant portion of her day. Although she had to apologize to the other girls often, she was no less a part of the group.

Dedra lives with her brother, mom, dad, grandma, sister, her sister's boyfriend, and their baby. As she lists the family members off, she ends with "and that's it," as if that were a small family. She's excited because her sister's family is moving out soon so she'll no longer have to share her room with her brother; otherwise, she harbors no resentment toward the members of her extended family and sees the multigenerational family unit as an integral part of her life.

Always ready to laugh, carry on a prank, or try to bend the rules just a little farther than the other girls are willing to, Dedra is both fun and unpredictable.

Kaia. Kaia was one of two girls in the eighth grade whom I would consider a loner. Amongst the boisterousness of her peers, her comfort with being quiet and alone stood out. Chubby and with the booming laugh that I associate with large, grown women, Kaia was one of my favorites even though, or perhaps because, she largely treated me

like a pet. Unless she was in a particularly bad mood, she never failed to greet me with a hug and, after the one study hall period during which she spent the entire time playing with my hair (amazed at its inability to hold the shapes she brushed it in to), she always gave my hair a quick pet by way of greeting.

Kaia showed very little interest in being interviewed and with the sudden and unexpected death of her mother in the spring semester, pursuing an interview was inappropriate. Prior to her mother's death, Kaia and her mother lived together. However, she has an extensive extended family in the area that seems to be a part of her day-to-day life. After her mother's death, Kaia began living with her father.

Although I might have originally thought Kaia one of the less mature girls—she was often prone to whining—after the death of her mother, I realized my perceptions were entirely wrong. She handled it with more grace than I've ever seen anyone handle the death of someone close to them.

Rashona. Rashona was the other loner among the eighth grade girls. I never once saw her break away from work in class or study hall for more than a couple of minutes, despite the often hilarious and nearly always loud antics of her classmates. Shorter than many of her classmates, her body was the physical manifestation of her sturdiness. Her metal-rimmed glasses added to the image of stability.

Rashona lives with her mom, dad, her three younger sisters, and two younger brothers. She took on a lot of responsibility for the younger children, but saw it as a legitimate role for the oldest to take on. I might expect a lot of arguing in such a large family because of crowded conditions, limited resources, and resentment over taking on such responsibility. However, Rashona brushed aside such questions with, "we might get into some arguments, but we get over it and apologize." One of Rashona's younger sisters is in the fifth grade at Scholastic Middle.

Kabira. Always moving, talking, and laughing, Kabira is the student you inwardly laugh at, even as you call her down. She walks a line between tomboy and coquette, for instance playing football and flirting with the boys simultaneously.

Kabira lives with her mother, stepfather, two younger sisters, and younger brother. She also has another brother and sister who live with her father. One of Kabira's

younger sisters is in the sixth grade at Scholastic Middle. They have very similar personalities in that they are both outgoing and quick to laugh.

Kabira is hard to pin down in a group. She is constantly moving from one person, idea, and thought, to another. However, in our interview she was nothing but thoughtful and showed a deep caring for her mother and siblings.

Tahira. Tahira is Kabira's physical opposite and best friend. Tahira has the same boisterousness but with a slightly darker, more menacing edge. She's tough, but unlike Jacynth who is so self-assured, there's an almost violent edge to Tahira's toughness. Her laugh is beautiful—loud, infectious, and full. It seems to take her over; once it starts nothing can stop it.

Tahira lives with her mom, stepdad, and older brother in Suitcase City. This is also where Kabira lives so they are together all the time. She doesn't seem to have many feelings about her brother one way or another since she doesn't see him much, because he's always at work or school. She also seems rather indifferent to her stepfather but spoke at length of her respect and devotion for her mother.

Both Tahira and Kabira are fiercely devoted to two things: their mothers and step dancing. Both participate four days a week in step practice and both spent a great deal of their interviews praising their mothers' work ethic and care for them.

Chantoya. Chantoya is another member of the boisterous group. If anyone could manage to be the center of attention of this group of dynamic girls, it is Chantoya. Always laughing and seemingly unafraid of anything, she has a great mix of fearlessness, self-confidence and joy. The lead in the school play, "Drop Dead, Juliet!" her portrayal of a sassy Juliet who takes Shakespeare to task for his treatment of women in his plays was truly hilarious.

Chantoya lives with her mom, stepdad, and two younger sisters, one of whom is in the seventh grade at Scholastic Middle. Just as she is a leader in her grade and for the school in general, she has a lot of responsibility in her home. Given her parents' work schedules, she often looks after her youngest sister with the help of her 12-year-old sister.

Chantoya has a self-professed "smart mouth," but rarely gets into trouble given her impressive ability to read situations and engage in code-switching (Garner & Rubin,

1986; Scotton & Ury, 1977). She moves from cutting up with her classmates to being studious and engaged in no time.

Though the eighth grade girls were probably my favorite group at Scholastic Middle. I also had the chance to frequently engage with the eighth grade boys. I became charmed by their savvy and unique traits as well.

Eighth Grade Boys

Much of my time spent with the eighth grade boys was during academic classes including writing, drama, and English. I saw some of them during extracurricular activities, but many of them chose sports-related extracurriculars in which I was not involved. Compared to the girls, the boys were quiet, which is not so much a comment on how quiet the boys actually were but how loud the girls managed to be. Although an extremely tight-knit group, the boys were more prone to talking and working in small groups rather than as a whole. The boy who most bucked this trend and was always in the middle of everything was Brian.

Brian. Brian is one of the smallest boys in the class. Whether his class clown status springs from this or other circumstances, he fulfilled his role consistently and perfectly. Always cutting up and laughing, he was perhaps the boy most often chastised and disciplined for talking.

As the first student that I interviewed, Brian immediately challenged any preconceptions I had about what the students—especially the boys—would want to talk about. His interview proved to be an accurate predictor of what I would learn in later interviews. He showed a great deal of care for his mother and cited few brand names among other things.

Brian lives with his mother and baby brother. He often takes care of his brother. When I ask him if he changes diapers, he replies, “Yes, ma’am,” with nothing in his tone to indicate that this is something out of the ordinary for a 13-year-old boy. It is simply one of the many things he does to try and help his mother. The “ma’am” part of his reply also demonstrates his communication style. He uses this very formal address with a sense of excitement and enthusiasm. His warm and animated personality is tempered with sarcasm in a way that makes him entirely unique.

Alexander. Although none of the boys identify “best friends” the ways the girls do, Brian’s frequent companion is Alexander. Similar in size, they are nearly the smallest kids in the school, let alone the eighth grade. Alexander is also a cut-up.

Until the spring semester of his eighth grade year, Alexander lived with his mother and two older sisters. Like Kaia, Alexander lost his mother during the school year. Alexander’s mother, one of the most involved parents at the school, was killed in a car accident. This loss hit the entire school hard, leaving all Scholastic Middle students in tears for much of the day. The eighth grade boys were unable to attend to any of their classes and spent much of the day crying and talking with the school counselor and their teachers. Unlike in Kaia’s case, in which her family stepped in to take care of her, Alexander’s grandmother was in bad health up north and his father was a somewhat unstable and absent force living in another state.

When Alexander returned to school following the funeral, he was living with Josia’s (his classmate’s) mother and Josia’s younger brother. Four of Alexander’s classmates’ families had offered to take him in. Josia’s mother, an employee of the school, was appointed as his guardian. When they finished eighth grade, Alexander went on to boarding school with Josia.

Amazingly, Alexander’s exuberant personality was little changed by the death of his mother. After a few weeks, he acted as wild and fun as ever. I imagine this was due in large part to the way that his classmates and the school rallied around him during and after the tragedy.

DeAngelo. DeAngelo is 6’ 5” and rarely said a word to me. If he had been the first interview, I would have dreaded talking to the tween boys. However, there seemed to be no malice underlying the silence, simply shyness. Luckily, his shyness did not keep DeAngelo from performing in the school play.

DeAngelo is the last of his siblings to live at home, and he lives there with his mother. Unlike many of the other students, he did not worry too much about his mother. This could be because his description of her was as incredibly strong, someone not given (at least in front of him) to displays of emotion. However, it could also be that she is under less financial strain because he is the only child at home.

DeAngelo was the Romeo of the eighth grade. He had at least one eighth grade girl he had been “talking to” and another who was dating him at Scholastic Middle.

Taite. The best way to describe Taite is gregarious and outgoing. This served him well as the lead of the school play. Like DeAngelo, Taite lives alone with his mom. His older brother is in his mid-20s and has moved out of the house. Still, he spoke with a great deal of concern about helping his mother in whatever way he could. This care was similar to what he showed for his classmates. More than once I saw him jump to help them with homework or help them to answer a question in class.

Aaron. Like Taite, Aaron does not mind being the center of attention; however, he’s less adept at gaining people’s attention in a positive way. Although not sought out frequently by the boys, they fully accept him as part of their group. He seems to gain a great deal of pleasure in annoying the girls. Not afraid to make mean comments toward them; he doesn’t take it well when the eighth grade girls stand up to him.

Aaron lives with his grandmother. However, I never received an informed consent form from him, so I was unable to interview him and gain any further details about his life.

Demaine. Demaine also manages to make his peers laugh, frequently at the risk of getting into trouble by behaving inappropriately in class. Much of his inappropriate behavior involves being mean, which is a rare trait among Scholastic Middle students. He acts dismissive of school activities, but jumps in to participate when asked directly, making this nonchalance seem a front. He was incredibly proud to be cast in a small role in the play.

Demaine lives with his mom and several brothers and sisters, one of whom is less than six months old. However, he rarely talks about them. For a kid who talks all the time, he manages not to disclose much about his life. The most personal thing I learned about him is that his greatest desire is to become a fighter pilot.

Edwyn. Edwyn managed to become dirty every single day. Despite the fact that students were only allowed to play touch football, every recess he still managed to return covered in dirt. I can only imagine that his mother spent a great deal of time treating and washing his clothing.

Unable to interview him, I am unsure of his entire family situation, but I know that he has at least one younger brother who is a “mini-me” version of him. They look exactly alike, except his brother is much smaller. Edwyn is always polite and a bit quiet. His demeanor makes it hard to tell if he is just shy or uninterested.

Eldad. Skinny, quiet, and entirely unobtrusive, Eldad is the kind of kid you have no idea is even in the room. Unlike so many of his classmates, I don't remember him ever being called out for talking or goofing around. Get him started in a game and he is focused and competitive. The kids played a lot of games I had not been introduced to before. One of these is mancala, a count and capture game. Eldad and Brian taught me how to play; however I soon realized I was irritating Eldad both with the amount of time it took me to play and by how easy it was to beat me.

Given how shy he seemed, it was surprising that he was one of two eighth grade boys to have a girlfriend in the school. He and Ianna dated for most of eighth grade.

Josias. Josias was the valedictorian of the eighth grade. Although very focused on his work, as one might imagine with such an accomplishment, he is also quite social and popular with his peers.

Josias's sociability may come from his mother. She worked as the secretary for the school for a few months, and I came to know her as very kind and always ready to talk. She was warm and friendly with everyone as was Josias.

Josias and his family showed their dedication to the school and students by bringing Alexander to live with them after his mother died.

More Knowing and Crazy Tweens

I was unable to make as clear an assessment of the other grade groups as I did of the eighth grade girls and boys. My knowledge of the students largely came about as a result of their willingness to talk to me and because they put up with having me around. This is also why I became closer to the girls than the boys. They simply seemed more interested in me. This says something about the fortuitous nature of fieldwork. I happened into study hall with the eighth grade girls early on. I could just have easily been placed with another class and spent more of time with another group. However, because

of the widespread distribution of consent forms, I was lucky enough to get to know other students. At least one student from each boys' and girls' class was interviewed.

Cynthia. One of the seventh grade girls, Cynthia nearly always has a half-grin, half-smirk on her face. She has a sarcastic yet gentle sense of humor that makes people laugh and rarely hurts anyone's feelings.

She lives with her mom, dad, and older brother and has a sister who has already moved out of the house. She revels in being the youngest because she feels both her parents and her older siblings spoil her. When questioned about what this spoiling entails, she lists having her own room and being driven places.

Although she likes being spoiled, it also seems that she might like to have other siblings around. With both of her parents and brother working, she spends a lot of time alone.

Norrence. A seventh grade boy, Norrence is always laughing and making fun of others. However, as a slightly chubby boy, he generally gets a little hurt when others comment on his weight. His kidding and much of that directed toward him is relatively gentle. There is a definite maturing process to be seen across the grades with the fifth graders generally being the harshest with one another. However, even over the time I was there, Norrence became gentler with others and thus was teased less.

Norrence lives with his mother, older brother, and three-year-old cousin. His cousin came to live with them when she was born so he sees her more as a sister.

Reed. Also a seventh grade boy, Reed is the loneliest kid I met at Scholastic Middle. He is one of only two interviewees who placed any real value or importance on name brands (despite that he could name very few brands when asked). He made clear connections between buying and love, as did many Scholastic Middle students (discussed in Chapter 6); however, Reed's connections were primarily negative. He desires to have name brands to show how important he is because he does not feel important to his family.

Reed lives with his great-aunt and uncle because his mother is in prison. He was unclear on how long he has lived there, but it has been several years. He spoke of going

shopping with his mom, but it seems to have either been some time ago or in between stays in prison.

Reed feels as if his aunt and uncle don't care about him as much as they do their grandchildren. He sees their preference in the things they buy for their grandchildren. The sole bright spot for Reed is his girlfriend, one of the seventh grade girls. As he speaks about her, his face brightens with a smile that, although he tries to contain it, breaks across his whole face.

Macella. Quiet and reserved, sixth grader Macella seems much older than 12. This is her first year at Scholastic Middle, and even well into the school year she still seems slightly surprised when any adult addresses her. When I come to get her for an interview, the situation is much the same as any time I've addressed her. Her eyes momentarily look toward the floor as if to take a moment to make sense of being addressed.

Macella lives with her mom, dad, and nine-year-old brother in a neighborhood she cannot identify but is "close" to the school. Both her parents are very involved in the school and closely follow her progress.

Despite her intense shyness with adults, she is vivacious and full of laughter around her peers.

Damien. Sixth grader Damien is the quintessential round-faced, innocent little boy. He's adorable and sweet, but somewhat uneven in his temper. This is unusual in the students, as most of them take joking rather well, either joking back or brushing it off. Damien takes a lot of things personally.

Damien lives with his father, stepmother, sister, stepbrother, and stepsister. His stepsiblings are older than he, while his sister is younger. Most of the kids blend their families relatively easily, only declaring stepfather or stepsiblings for my benefit but generally referring to them as siblings in their general talk. However, Damien is different. He details what he seems to see as a somewhat rocky family life. His father and stepmother have been married for 10 years, but she and his stepsiblings moved out of the house they all lived in together for three years before coming back. He details all of this for me without prompting, leading me to believe that it has been stressful for him.

Although he spends most of his time with his father, he does spend some weekends and weekdays with his mom. However, he doesn't fully understand how this arrangement is made, making it sound haphazard. He misses his mom and wants to spend more time with her.

One of only two participants who seemed unhappy in their interviews, Damien also was one of only two who really valued name brand clothes. He lit up when he spoke of things that were his, things that no one else could "take" from him. Like Reed, he seems to be looking for a personal sense of value and belonging in consumer goods that the other largely are not, looking for something that is missing in his family life and self-concept.

Shawntea. Shawntea expects you to pay attention to her. Bubbly, loud talking is her trademark, and although it can get her into trouble, it's also her best feature. As a fifth grader, she is on the bottom of the hierarchy at Scholastic Middle, but she pays no mind. If she wants an eighth grader to notice her, she will make sure it happens. I was no exception. Whenever I worked with her class, she asked me to sit with her and was happy to answer my questions with great detail, or, more often, to move the conversation to topics that she deemed more interesting.

Shawntea lives with her mom, dad, and 25-year-old brother. She adores her brother and went into great detail about the time they spend baking together. She is also Haitian, which is a very important part of her identity. Very few of the students identified with ethnicity, but for Shawntea most of her attitude and her family life are connected to this identity.

Shawntea was also one of the very few students who remembered what my research was about and that she did not have to participate just because her mom signed the consent form. "I know my rights," she told me in a tone that let me know she took the entire process very seriously. She called it "important work" and wanted to participate.

Taisha. Taisha, also a fifth grade girl, has a similarly bubbly personality. I often wondered how the teachers made it through any lessons with such a spirited bunch. Taisha approached our interview like a sponge. Rather than simply answering questions,

she often repeated them and tried to provide hypothetical examples to be sure she had the question right before providing her own answer. It was as if she were trying to absorb all of this knowledge for her own use.

Taisha lives with her mom and brother, and, like many of the students, seemed to have little idea about what neighborhood in Tampa she lived in. Not unexpectedly, all students could provide their addresses, but most had no idea in which neighborhood Tampa they lived.

Latoya. Although wearing the same uniform as all the other girls, fifth grader Latoya's clothing stands out for its tucked shirt, creased pants, and perfectly matched belt and shoes. She carries herself like one imagines royalty would walk, almost as if she expects to be stopped in her tracks by someone wishing to kiss her ring (if she were allowed to wear one).

Appearance is very important to her and she is one of the few students who names more than two to three brand names in her interview, although she admits to having relatively few brand-name items in her closet. She names these brands without fanfare or any sense of wistfulness. It's almost as if she is naming off states, elements, or some other type of knowledge that might show up on a school test. For all her talk about clothes and brand names, the first thing she would buy if she had \$20 is two green folders. She is also very interested in saving her money. The importance of saving is something she says she learned from both her mother, with whom she lives alone, and Donald Trump. An internet video of Trump talking about how to make money seems to have been quite an influence on her.

Ty. Small and wiry, Ty fits right in with the fifth grade boys. Ty is a child who keeps you on your toes. I spent a lot of study halls with Ty and his cohort. It was an all-or-nothing gamble: either you could get them all working right away or the entire hour was dedicated to attempting to stop but at best limiting various antics. Once he got going on his homework, Ty took great pleasure in finishing it and showing it to me.

Ty lives with his mom and grandmother in Country Trace, a low-income neighborhood not too far from the school. Although he liked to shop with his mom and

declared an affinity for name brand pants, his favorite clothing item was a *Juno* t-shirt he received for free outside the movie theater.

Malik. Malik is also a fifth grader and one of the few kids who hugged me nearly every time we met. When I saw him, I felt welcome. It is amazing how quickly he adapted to Scholastic Middle. When he attended his first summer session, I personally had to stop him from fighting twice. Prior to entering fifth grade, he had already learned how to posture and the necessity of fighting. I was surprised they accepted him after the summer trial session. However, I'm glad they did. As soon as he realized that the environment was safe, he adapted beautifully.

Malik lives with his mom and two younger brothers but also spends a lot of time visiting his grandfather in a nearby town.

Devon and Demarco. As my final interviewees among the fifth grade boys, I put Devon and Demarco together because they are identical twins—so identical that no matter how much time I spent with them, I couldn't tell them apart. They used my confusion as an opportunity to play tricks on me. This was the only set of siblings I had the opportunity to interview.

Devon and Demarco live with their mother, little brother, and older sister. Their interviews were interesting because both emphasized fairness and sharing. Although they recognized that holding to these values meant they had to sacrifice sometimes, they both thought it was worth it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed the locale of the school as well as a typical neighborhood in which the participants live. It is important to understand that these tweens and their school reside in typical (as much as any neighborhood can be considered typical or representative), poor, urban neighborhoods. I have also given brief introductions to the members of the eighth grade, many of whom I interviewed, and all with whom I spent a great deal of time. I also gave some details about the students in other grades who gave of their time to be interviewed. Although I did not cover all of the students of Scholastic Middle in this chapter, I learned a great deal from every individual student.

This chapter serves to familiarize you with the people who made this work possible and who created the insights that come later in this document. Their insights and creativity helped me to begin to answer how consumer culture and particularly brand name goods factor into their identities. What I found is that they are utilizing the resources of the consumer system, including brand names, in building their personal and social identities. However, as agents in this system they are not necessarily utilizing these resources in accordance with the rules of the system, and they are certainly not selfish, unthinking, or hedonistic consumers, as popular portrayals of them would have us believe.

The next chapters will detail how the tweens I worked with used consumer culture in profoundly social, caring and creative ways. First, I will address the ways that the tweens showed care for themselves and set up an expectation of care from others. Then I will show how the tweens gave care to others in their families and peer groups through monitoring and often denying their consumer desires as well as defending others who do not meet consumer standards. The third argument I will make is that these students are moving against the consumer structure in strategic and effective ways to change the politics of their identities and consumption. As the adage goes, one must love herself before she can love others, and therefore self-love is what will be addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Looking Good: The Performance of an Ethic of Care

Getting Respect

As we settle into drama class, I join Brian and Alexander at a table in the middle of the room. Both boys are small for their age and very funny. I'm not sure if one has to do with the other, but each boy has found his way socially at Scholastic Middle. In my few visits to the school so far, Brian especially has made an impression on me. He is adept at sarcastic, self-deprecating humor. Because of this, he is one of the first students whose name I know. I ask to sit down and am granted entry with a shrug that says, "Sure, whatever."

The class is working through a set of questions designed to help them create a character analysis for the monologues they're performing in a couple of weeks. Questions include, "Why is your character saying this? What does your character look like? What attitude(s) does your character have in this scene?" As Brian and Alexander go through the questions out loud, they're joking and talking. I'm not excluded from the conversation; nor am I intentionally drawn in until I prove my usefulness to them. Luckily, I have some experience with performance. When Brian says his character "is annoyed," I ask him why the character feels annoyed. He looks confused; I clarify by saying that the reasons the character is annoyed would play into how he *acts*. Brian decides his character isn't really annoyed, but instead frustrated and upset. In this way, they let me help them flesh out the attitudes, demeanor, and general motivations of their characters.

Brian's monologue is about a black boy, Byron, who is in love with a white girl, Amy. Amy returns Byron's affections but her mother does not like Byron because he is poor and black. Amy's mother tries to keep them apart until Byron becomes so upset he confronts the mother, pleading with her to let him see her daughter. The performance

centers on the argument he lays out to the mother about why he is a good match for her white, middle-class daughter.

Brian's worksheet is meant to help him focus on the protagonist's characteristics and the scene so he can perform them with his body and voice. He'll have no props or set and no one on stage with whom to interact. As he works through the intricacies of the character, Brian discusses how the boy feels, the mother's reasons for not liking him, and the persuasive strategies most likely to gain her good will. According to Brian, his goal is to show the mother that "he's a good kid, a nice guy who's going to be good to her daughter." A key aspect of this discussion and the character worksheet he's filling out is the character's presentation of self. What does the boy wear to impress the mother, to persuade her that he is a good boyfriend for her daughter? When Brian gets to this question, he says simply that the boy "dresses nice." He goes on to describe the boy's clothes: a "nice button-down shirt" and "some nice pants." Signaled by a nod, these answers are met with approval from Alexander, and Brian begins to write them down. I ask, "What kind of shirt? What kind of pants?"

Without hesitation, he replies, "An ironed shirt, clean, not wrinkled." Since I continue to look curious, he continues, "It fits right, not too baggy, but not too tight. The pants too, they fit. His shoes are clean and shined." I nod and he begins to write in these additional details on his worksheet. As he writes he continues to describe the boy's condition, "He's clean too. He's got his hair combed and greased right. And he's holding himself good, you know, standing up straight and stuff."

I ask why he chose this outfit and why a lack of wrinkles matters. This time Brian looks at me with a combination of exasperation and confusion (this often happens when I ask seemingly stupid questions and I've come to expect it). With the patience of a parent talking to a child, he says, "It shows he's good, a good person, that he respects himself." As I'm on the cusp of another "stupid" question and certain nonverbal rebuke from Brian, the teacher breaks into the conversation with another set of directions.

Self-Respect, Self-Care, and Consumption

Brian's explanation of his character's clothing was not a conversation fully bound by his reality. Although Brian has to perform this, he and his peers were operating in the

realm of brainstorming and reality construction. Improbable options to resolve the situation like “they should get on a plane” and “get married” had already been suggested to connect the ill-fated teenagers in the monologue. The clothes in his own closet did not limit Brian in this exercise. He could have chosen a tuxedo or a jogging suit for Byron. He could have built an outfit from the most expensive line of name brand of clothing he knows. He could add jewelry or athletic shoes to Byron’s ensemble—but he did not. He dealt with the situation and the assignment by making his character “look nice” and used this as the defining premise for the acceptability of the outfit. He then described an outfit that anyone I know would consider appropriate for a fourteen-year-old, or 40-year-old, to wear to meet his girlfriend’s mother.

Brian addressed the communicative roles that the presentation of self, in this case looking good, performs. He clearly and consciously articulated that to look good is to show something about yourself and your relationships to others. To look good is to signal to others the deepest levels of who you are; looking good evidences your moral center. As Brian puts it, “he’s a good kid, a nice guy who’s going to be good to her daughter.” Looking good is about more than the clothes and more than the moment in which they are being worn and more than the process of consumption that led up to the wearing. It is about proving goodness, care, and respect, and ultimately morality.

Although dressing a character for the stage, Brian sees himself in Byron (the character). He picked this monologue because he related to it. In addition, throughout this project (which goes on for several class periods), he refers to the character as “me” and “I.” In many ways, it is Brian who is getting dressed, and he is getting dressed to impress the mother. He is aware that careful attention has to be paid to the type of clothes worn and the presentation—the ironing, shining, and tucking-in—of those clothes. He has a great deal of discursive and practical knowledge (Giddens, 1986) regarding dressing well. He explains that ironing, shining, and tucking-in must be done to look nice.

Brian’s thoughts on his character’s outfit show something I came across again and again in both interviews and interactions: These tweens do not talk about brands. What they do discuss is “looking nice” and “looking good,” and they further connect looking good with self-respect. Several aspects of looking good deserve exploration. What is

“looking good”? How do showing respect and care for oneself play into looking good? To get to these questions, I’ll begin by discussing common understandings of poor, minority, urban tweens and their storied relationships with brands as hedonistic; discuss the tenets of looking good; explore how brands fit and do not fit into looking good; and finally survey the connections between looking good and care for self.

Hedonism, Anti-Consumers, and Combat Consumers

Common conceptions of poor, minority, urban youth and their use of and engagement with consumer culture focus on hedonistic aspects of consumption (Chin, 2001; Kotlowitz, 1991, 1999, 2000; Nightingale, 1993). Without regard to the constraints on their lives, the pursuit of name brand apparel, electronics, and jewelry is seen in the media as not only the sole form of consumption of this group, but also as choices made without intelligence, savvy, or care for others (Chin, 2001; Kotlowitz, 1991, 1999, 2000; Nightingale, 1993).

Hedonism posits that human beings make decisions based on the ratio of pleasure to pain: pleasure should be maximized and pain minimized (Moore, Fall 2008). Although some philosophers have pointed to hedonism as the basis for an altruistic society (Moore, Fall 2008), the popular conception of hedonism is negative. Hedonism is primarily understood as a self-centered take on life. Hedonists are interested only in immediate pleasure for themselves without considering the long-term consequences to self or others. The consumption that is the foundation of a consumer culture can be understood as hedonistic. Often engaged in to increase our pleasure and status, the majority of middle-class consumption is not necessary for survival or even modest comfort. And in a privatized consumer culture, purchases are made for the individual and thus centered on the self rather than made for the greater good. In fact, alongside an increase in private spending, public spending is at an all time low, leaving many people and neighborhoods struggling (Pugh, 2009; Putnam, 2000; Schor, 1998). Such “tax” revolt can be at least partially attributed to a desire to keep income for oneself for private consumption (Pugh, 2009; Schor, 1998). However, although much contemporary consumption could be understood as hedonistic, it is the poor, especially the urban, minority, poor, who are

most frequently labeled as hedonists³⁹ (see Chin 1993, 1999, 2001; Kotlowitz 1991, 1999, 2000, Pugh, 2009) while the same consumption by the middle- and upper-classes is celebrated.⁴⁰

Chin (2001) goes beyond the general conception of hedonism to explore the images of what she calls the “anti-consumer” (p. 43) and “combat consumer” (p. 47). She argues that images of the welfare queen or street corner drug dealer have become virtually synonymous with poor, urban Black people. This “anti-consumer,” is someone who spends money she has not legally or rightfully earned on things she does not need and should not have. “They are morally corrupt consumers, dangerous and threatening. The evidence of their moral corruption is their very consumption” (p. 43). Anti-consumerist portrayals of poor, minority consumers do not take into account structural constraints, but instead place all responsibility (and therefore blame) on a mythical individual’s choices—as if she was unfettered and unconstrained by institutional practices. Chin (2001) argues that these images are simply transformations of earlier images of slaves that allowed slave holders to see slaves’ needs and desires as “being rooted in depravity” (p. 38). Critiques of slaves’ consumption similarly portrayed slaves’ needs as luxuries and considered their willingness to work on Sunday to procure such things as furniture, clothes, and kitchen utensils as a kind of immorality and depravity (Chin, 2001, p. 38).

Chin (2001) describes the “combat consumer” (p. 47) as purportedly created through the violence of poor, urban, black boys and the materialism of their female counterparts, who accomplish consumption through thievery and violence (p. 47). Chin asserts that media accounts of youth stealing and killing for jewelry and sneakers “serve to cement dominant and ahistorical narratives about the consumption of the poor rather

³⁹ Kozol (1992) describes this lack of ability to see how tax codes and other institutionalized practices enacted by powerful and generally white and middle and upper class groups, neighborhoods, and voting factions affect poor neighborhoods and education living with the feeling of “ethical exemption” (p. 178). By disguising inequality as meritocracy, those in power do not need to take responsibility for the effects of their decisions. This ethical exemption also includes what is deemed appropriate and inappropriate consumption for different groups.

⁴⁰ Referring back to points made in Chapter 4: Cohen (1998) details the movement of the U.S. economy to a personal consumption model, and we were urged after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in the current recession to spend to fulfill our citizenship duties.

than provide any contextually situated insight” (p. 48). These narratives present minority consumption as going beyond hedonism to levels of pathological depravity. The very desires of poor minorities are criminalized, despite very little difference existing between their desires and white, middle-class desires (see Chin, 2001; Kotlowitz, 1999, 2000; Pugh, 2009). Representations of the anti-consumer and combat consumer are based in unfettered individual agency and ignore the structures that constrain and prohibit such flagrant and self-centered individual action.

There are two main problems with these representations: prevalence and context (Chin, 2001). First, they are overly prevalent and relatively stable across media (Chin, 2001, p. 48; see Hallsworth, 2006; Rome, 2004). These are the stories told over and over for their sensational content. Like Jhally’s argument in *Dreamworlds* (Media Education Foundation, 1995) that the highly sexualized and objectified images of women in the media are not themselves the only problem, but rather that such portrayals prohibit alternative views to complement/contradict in their proliferation. The reprehensible may be a true, though isolated, incident, but it is the almost monolithic prevalence of this narrative that is problematic. That the story is likely to be rare and more complex than media accounts report, or context, is the second problem. Acts of the anti- or combat consumer are decontextualized, playing on structure and content that revolves around violence and women who are either ineffectual mothers or materialistic girlfriends in (generally) male lives (Chin, 2001, p. 49). Rather than focusing on the structures of racism, poverty, and consumer culture that encourage such violent acts, these stories focus on these men and women, boys and girls. Acts of violent consumption are not as prevalent as the media portray and are only one among many types of consumption.

The way poor, minority, urban tweens are viewed when they wear name brand fashions or jewelry is as if they have done something criminal to get them. The result of being marked by class and race as a combat or anti-consumer is that to consume is itself a representation of immorality and criminality (Chin, 2001; see Pattilo-McCoy, 1999). When speaking of the various instances of reporting on combat consumers, some as young as ten years old, Chin says,

It is a portrayal tapping a particularly insidious American myth: that the poor are highly susceptible to commodity fetishism, that they are addicted to brands, and that they are willing to acquire expensive things even at the cost of their own (or someone else's) health and/or well-being. (2001, p. 56)

Neither the tweens I worked with nor the similar groups that Chin (1993, 1999, 2001), Kotlowitz (1999, 2000), Nightingale (1993), or Pugh (2009) studied came close to these images of the combat- or anti-consumer. Not only are they not hedonistic consumers but they also put great effort into limiting their own consumption and trying to better understand the connections between consumption and social identity, despite the constraints placed on their consumer choices. Their consumption is first limited by the amount of money to which they and their families have access. Beyond this are other structural constraints on their buying including proximity of stores and, for many, the use of government programs like food stamps and WIC. These programs limit the majority of their food consumption and other household items and provide very different shopping experiences than afforded those who shop without government assistance. These shopping environments and experiences are key to how consumption is experienced and further problematize many of the negative assumptions detailed above.

Children in low-income urban neighborhoods often have severely limited retail options. Several students at Scholastic Middle noted that they purchased snacks and other foods at neighborhood bodegas or corner stores. For those students and families with limited access to transportation, corner stores operated as places where household staples like milk, bread, toiletries, and hot food are purchased (often at exorbitant prices).

In addition to corner stores, Wal-mart was by far the most commonly patronized clothing retailer. Given the several Super Wal-marts in the Tampa area, it is likely that many families do a majority of their clothing and household shopping there. Chin (1993), citing Ward et al. (1977), points to the supermarket as an important place where children receive consumer training. This training is complicated in a super-store setting because clothing, electronics, and toys become a part of grocery shopping.

For the consumption of name brand clothing and expensive jewelry to take a prominent role in the lives of poor, urban, minority youth (as accounts of hedonistic

consumption assume), these items would have to be frequently and easily accessible. However, these kinds of goods are most readily found in malls. Malls are not common in poor, urban neighborhoods (Alwitt & Donley, 1997) and when they are present, precautions like curfews, a lack of bus stops, and architectural groundwork like fences and hedges keep poor, minority youth out (Davis, 2002).⁴¹ Despite Tampa having five major indoor malls and countless strip malls, very few students mentioned these as places they frequented often, although nearly all mentioned enjoying the mall. Malls served most often as a figurative rather than literal part of their consumer lives. There was an exception for those who lived in the University Community Area, which surrounds the University Mall⁴². For these children, hanging out at the mall was common, although they didn't have many stories to share about buying there. The mall was primarily a social space, rather than a buying space (see Hallsworth, 2006; Thomas, 2005). By analyzing the spaces that the tweens in this study have access to, frequent, and spoke about, it becomes clear that status or brand consumption takes up relatively little of their money or time. Also, given the number of malls and the fact that the majority of the families at Scholastic Middle own at least one car, these tweens are likely to have more access to brand name consumption than poor tweens living in more densely populated urban areas.

Far from being hedonistic consumers, the tweens I worked with understand a great deal about the complexity of their consumption and its effects on their families. When I asked about what they consumed, many students spoke about food, electric bills, transportation, and rent in addition to clothing and toys. They are particularly aware that their desires for clothing and toys are part of the many expenses their parents incur on their behalf. This awareness leads them to be very careful in what they ask for and expect from their parents. When they do ask for clothing and shoes, they do so with the strategic goal of "looking good." They recognize that their consumption is tied to their

⁴¹ In fact, private retail security has significantly contributed to an increase in private police forces in the U.S. (Bayley & Shearing, 1996).

⁴² It is also important to note that unlike other high-end malls in Tampa, the University Mall is an aging, urban mall with many low-end stores (for example, Burlington Coat Factory and other non-chain urban-wear stores). It is aimed at a lower middle-class clientele.

presentation of self and seek to create a presentation that shows themselves as individuals who respect and care for themselves and who are respected and cared for by others.

Looking Good

The tweens spent a great deal of time discussing being presentable, looking nice, and looking good (hereafter looking good). Looking good is about two main things: looking like yourself and looking presentable to others. For the tweens, reaching the balance between these two goals lets others know a bit about who they are (their personal style and attributes), that they have respect and enact care for themselves, and that others care about them. Focusing on looking good also shows an understanding that one is being looked at and surveilled (Foucault, 1977). They realize that they are being watched and judged as normal or delinquent. In the initial story in this chapter, Brian talks about the various tactics for self presentation that his character Byron must use to make a good impression on his girlfriend's mother. Byron's best possible presentation of self depends on taking time for dressing and grooming.

Jacynth went even farther in her description of the role grooming plays in looking good by judging those who do not pay close attention to grooming standards harshly. Despite recognizing that it can take a lot of time and effort to make one's hair "look nice," she replies, "No matter what, you should look nice. Your hair should be done everywhere you go." This type of judgment without attention to circumstances was completely uncharacteristic of Jacynth and her peers, as I discuss further in the next chapter. However, in terms of grooming, she was unable to accept that individuals might not do their best—anything within and even beyond their control—to look nice. In terms of brushing your hair and being clean she saw no reason, no matter how much time it might take you, not to do these things. Jacynth makes assumptions about agency,⁴³ albeit different assumptions than those in the popular imagination regarding these youth. She is assuming access to not only a usable bathroom setting but also to grooming products.

For the tweens, grooming is very important and something that cannot be made up for with attention to other details like clothing, even brand-name clothing. However, clothing too plays a large role in looking good. Also, although grooming requires a great

⁴³ These assumptions are founded in normalizing judgment (Foucault, 1977), something the tweens largely fight against (discussed in Chapter 7).

deal of time, knowledge, and resources, it is not the most frequently considered aspect of consumer culture popularly associated with these tweens. Therefore, brands and clothing, the aspects that are most often questioned and commented upon as part of their hedonistic consumer identities, deserve attention in their role in looking good.

Far from the obsessed combat consumer, the tweens I worked with talked about brands in nuanced ways. What is perhaps most interesting is that they did not talk about brands a great deal; at least not in concrete terms or without direct, and sometimes sustained, prompting. Brands are not as important to looking good as time and attention to self. If you have a wrinkled designer shirt, you don't look good. It is this function, the role that brands might play in "looking good," that primarily makes them desirable. To explain looking good, this section first addresses the limited ways that brands are used toward this goal and then discusses the more salient tenets of looking good. The chapter will then move on to discuss how looking good factors into creating the image of a cared-for self.

The Limited Role of Brands

The shift from the popularly understood importance of brands to this group to a focus on "looking good" came through clearly in the ways they spoke about what they liked to wear. Brands are by no means an overwhelming part of the tweens' consumption; however, they do have limited uses. Brands serve as short cuts to looking good and communicating positive attributes of the wearer.

In most interviews I posed the question, "What is your favorite outfit?" I asked this question to ascertain what they thought of as stylish and fashionable and expected that brands would play a role in the descriptions of these outfits. However, brands had little to no role in their descriptions. Instead, they offered the type of clothing and descriptions (i.e., color, fit, attractiveness). When I followed up with "What brand is the shirt you just described?" the brands were frequently not recognizable to me or, more often, the students did not know the brand name at all.

I ask Devon, a fifth grade boy, to tell me about his favorite outfit. He says he doesn't have one. Next, I ask him to tell me about a good outfit. He says, "My striped shirt and some nice shorts." To not even have a favorite outfit shows less emphasis on

clothing than I expected. But just as important, and something I found in nearly every interview, is that his description of a good outfit does not include any mention of the brand of his clothing. I continued with this line of questioning in my interviews with Scholastic Middle students; however, I was also quick to offer alternative questions such as, “What kind of clothes do you like?” to allow participants latitude in describing their clothing practices and preferences.

When I ask Devon’s twin brother, Demarco, what kind of clothes he likes, we move through three sets of questions before any mention of a brand. He responds, “gym shorts.” When I ask what other types of clothes he likes, he says, “fancy pants, fancy clothes, like shirts and stuff.” The use of the word “fancy” leads me to think he’s talking about name brands. However, when I follow up by asking what he would wear if he were going out to the mall tonight, he says, “I would probably wear some pants, pants that’s not too big and not too small. At least make it like dark blue or something, and at least a sign in the front, and a shirt that’s striped, and green and black and stuff.” Only in my fourth attempt for clarification, is there some indication that a brand might matter in the reference to “a sign in the front.” Through further questions, I find out a sign is a label for a brand and that “they don’t have to have a label on them, but I think to me it looks a little bit better.” However, when I ask why a “sign” looks better, he does not reference the brand but says, “Because if I was to wear some beat-up shorts, and nothing on it, it’d probably look dumb.” To wear beat up shorts would generally be unacceptable, therefore having a brand name on them makes them look less beat up. Although the shorts would look more acceptable, the brand would not redeem beat up shorts. Beat up trumps branding. However, if he took care of the shorts, the brand would not matter. In the end, brands are hardly more at the center of looking good for Demarco than they were for his brother.

When I ask about her favorite outfit, Tahira, an eighth grade girl, says, “It’s this pink shirt and these checkerboard gauchos, and it’s so cute. I like it.” When I ask her what shoes she wore with it, she says, “Some silver little string-up shoes.” Again, she does not mention brands. Also interesting is that she wore this outfit to a special day at school last year, which shows that her favorite outfit is one that she has had for some

time. Not only keeping but also continuing to enjoy a year-old outfit suggests that she is not concerned with keeping up with the high turnover in clothing consumption.

By no means are the students overall opposed to brands or immune to their allure. Demarco thinks a label “looks a little better.” We can also look at eighth grader Cala who loves fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Ebony* and spends a lot of time reading them to help her reach her dream of creating her own successful magazine. Cala believes that Jordans⁴⁴ are nice, but decides she’s not “really into that type of thing.” Throughout Cala’s interview it is clear that she likes expensive things like Gucci and Jordans, but has chosen to define herself in different ways. Instead of wearing the Jordan athletic shoes so popular in her peer group, she says she would rather wear dress shoes, something that need not be branded and therefore significantly cheaper and easily purchased at Wal-mart where she says she gets many of her clothes.

Cala doesn’t wear dress shoes because the Jordans have no meaning for her, and not because she doesn’t want them. She wears dress shoes because she likes the dress shoes too and this is a choice that is easier on her family’s finances. She says, “I mean, if I like, if I had the option, I would wear Jordans and everything. But, you know like I said, the money situation, like you already know.⁴⁵ So I wouldn’t ask for something that big, plus that’s just not something I’m into.” Brands are not central, although they are also not absent from the tweens concept of looking good. Cala bypasses asking for the branded shoe and doesn’t see it as necessary to her look given her financial situation; however, when name brand products are utilized it is as a short cut or personal signifier.

Brands as short cut.

For Cala and her peers, brands are understood as one, but not the only, way to look good. Instead, they offer a shortcut to looking good. Whatever their import, name brands are not *necessary* to looking good. When I asked Devon why he thought some people cared about name brands more than he did, he said, “Because they don’t know which clothes to sort out. If they know they like a name brand, that makes it easier to

⁴⁴ Michael Jordan athletic shoes made by Nike.

⁴⁵ Cala spoke about the relative poverty her family lived in as a fact of life to which I must be privy. Cala knows the financial situation in her family from everyday interaction and expects that I understand the same. Similar to other studies of youth in universally poor school setting, poverty is largely not referenced with shame (see Pugh, 2009).

shop.” Tahira echoes this by saying, “Some people its all about show. I think it’s all about how intelligent you are.” To buy clothing that looks good without relying on name brands requires knowledge and creativity.

Devon and his peers believe they have these skills and knowledges, and therefore they do not need to depend on name brands. They hold this knowledge in practical consciousness and thus are aware of it and can articulate it. Through their creative style they are agents actively addressing the structure of consumer culture and fashion. They are utilizing their knowledge to subvert the brand resources of the structure. Knowing a name brand makes it “easier to shop” in that it is a short cut around acquiring and utilizing the various knowledges otherwise necessary to put together good looking outfits. Looking good is a rule of the consumer system and having the expertise to do so is a resource. Because these tweens have these knowledges, they can avoid purchasing brands and thus bypass more expensive aspects of the consumer system. They are also attempting to be judged normal consumers when surveilled without paying for it by the use of name brands.

Brands as personal signifier.

The second use of brands the tweens saw was as personal signifier. When the students talked about the attributes of brands, including why they liked certain brands more than others, it was often because they saw desirable brands as showing something positive about them. Sometimes celebrity affiliation with the brand was a positive, at other times it was a characteristic of the brand that appealed to the tweens.

Often, the celebrity related to a product superseded the importance of the brand. Jordans were nearly always listed as a separate brand from Nike, despite the fact that Jordans are a Nike brand shoe. The connection with and desire for these products was connected with admiration for Michael Jordan, rather than the shoe named for him. For instance, Malik thought being associated with Sean John was positive because of Sean John Combs’s (recording name Diddy)⁴⁶ success as both a musician and a businessperson.

⁴⁶ At the time of writing, his recording name is Diddy, however he has been previously known as both Puff Daddy and P. Diddy and there have recently been rumors of another name change (MTV News, 2008).

However, the tweens were also critical of celebrity endorsements and clothing products. After expressing his admiration for Soulja Boy, a popular rap artist, dancer, and record producer, I ask Demarco if he would buy Soulja Boy clothes if he came out with a line. He responded, “No, because he’s my favorite rapper to a song, not just to everything I see and want to touch.” These celebrity affiliations also became problematic when the endorser loses status, such as NFL player Michael Vick, who had a line of Nike shoes before being convicted of dog fighting and sent to prison. Chantoya says, “Well it was kinda sad, like I got these shoes for this stupid person; he lost everything he got.” Chantoya continued to wear the shoes because she didn’t feel it was a good reason to ask for new shoes, but much of her pleasure in wearing them was gone.

Other times the brand identity itself was seen as a way to communicate the identity of the wearer. For eighth grader Ianna, Ralph Lauren is a brand that makes her feel “happy” because, she says, it “fits my personal style. I have class, classic style. I like fashion.” When I push her to define class, she says, “Like older, sophisticated.” She goes on to describe wearing the “basics” like pairing black and white and wearing jeans that fit well. Ralph Lauren is the only expensive brand she names and she marks it as her favorite. She says it “fits her personal style” because it is “classy.” When I question the connections between her “classy” style and why she likes to wear Ralph Lauren she says, “It just says it, shows it.” Following Ralph Lauren’s advertised image, she sees the brand as associated with class and sees herself as a classy person, therefore making a nice match and allowing others to see the classiness that she possesses. She doesn’t derive class from Ralph Lauren, but communicates class with it.

Important in both talk about brand affiliation via celebrity and personal style is the reversal of a contagion-based model of identity construction. Like a contagious virus that travels from person to person, so does discussion of brands move through popular discourse. The brand has a characteristic that the wearer is trying to possess, to catch, to be given. The individual receives a sense of status or a quality, for example athleticism or class from the brand.

Kotlowitz (1999, 2000) found that urban kids were trying to connect with the stability of the upper classes when wearing the same brands as white, suburban kids.

Nightingale (1993) too found that name brands serve as a connection to the “good life” for inner-city kids. Nightingale says, “the values of conspicuous consumption, as well as the material trappings of those values, become a growing part of poor African-American children’s upbringing in inner-city neighborhoods” (p. 135). In order to create a compensatory identity (Nightingale, 1993), an identity that substitutes for marred race and class identities, teens become more interested in name brands, prestige items, and fashion consciousness. They search for “imitation luxury”—“symbols of status, excess, manhood, and violence” (p. 141), status-redeeming products, to overcome feelings of inferiority based on race and class.

Although I cannot say that the tweens I worked with do not see these factors in the use of name brands at all, I can say that their talk does not show that they primarily see the brands as the carriers of positive characteristics and themselves as the receivers. Ianna does not get “class” from Ralph Lauren. She *has* class (based on style, confidence, and social skill rather than on socioeconomic status) and the brand *reflects* this class. The brand helps her to manage the impression she makes on others (Goffman, 1959) by using a culturally—known symbol. The brand shows her class. It does not create it.

When I ask Cala, “If you had to pick one brand that is you, could you pick one?”

She replies, “No, because no brand can ever make me, like *I’m* a brand. So if I just picked one, like Louis Vuitton, that wouldn’t be me. But, like a combination of everything’s me.” Not only is the brand not Cala, but she sees herself as having qualities more complex, important, distinct, and interesting enough to be a brand all her own. She says, “I’m a brand,” indicating that there is something more to her, more interesting than any brand anyone else has created.

Cala and the other tweens use brands to communicate their identities to others; brands do not imbue them with these identities. This complicates the views of Nightingale (1993) and Kotlowitz (1999, 2000). It shows opposite of Quart’s (2003) findings. Quart (2003) found that the upper class teens she worked with considered brands to be similar to celebrities and, “By this logic, the most famous brand is the greatest; and when teens fuse with top brands, *they* become the greatest, as well” (p. 21). Conversely, Cala sees *herself* as the greatest, without the help of the brand. “I am a

brand,” she declares, and no other brand can express so unique and interesting an identity as she herself already possesses.

This reversal of contagion of the identity (i.e., the brand does not contain the quality, but simply communicates a quality the wearer already possesses) begs the question of whether middle and upper class perceptions of poor consumption are simply projections of those classes’ issues regarding identity, consumption, and hedonism. Pugh (2009) finds that affluent parents worry about the effects of consumer culture on their children and define their children’s consumption in terms of what they have not bought them or what Pugh calls “symbolic deprivation” to prove their own “moral restraint and worthiness as parents” (p. 9). Perhaps it is somehow the worries of the affluent regarding having too much and being too enmeshed in consumer culture that are being transferred onto youth whose consumption may be visible, but is still much less prevalent (in terms of financial, time, and attention investments) than that of other classes.

The agency and actions of the tweens at Scholastic Middle are being misread by the culture at large. The tweens have taken the rules (consumption status/ name-brand products) and resources (the products themselves) and re-written them with profound consequences for their identities. Students at Scholastic Middle address aspects of context, type, quality, and desirability of clothing in their concept of looking good.

Tenets of Looking Good

The answers I got to questions regarding their favorite outfits or outfits they would “wear to the mall” consistently described the outfit in terms of the context where the clothes were to be worn, the type of clothes (pants, shorts, capris, polo shirts, t-shirts, etc.), the qualities of the clothes (color, fit, and style such as baggy or long), and a general assessment of the desirability of their favorite outfits (nice, cute, “fine,” or “tight”).

Context was important to the description of the type of clothing and how this influenced the general assessment of looking good. Taite says,

I was always taught you got to show up for the job that you’re doing. So if you’re a professor, I don’t think you would dress in jeans and a t-shirt. People won’t take you seriously. So, that’s why I say that attire is so important. Normally if that’s your job, like in the business world, the suit is the universal thing. Casual? Casual

is fine when you're back home. But in the business world, the suit is the universal thing or at least some nice pants and a shirt, but never jeans and a t-shirt.

Taite understands that different situations call for different clothing and projects these lessons forward in his life. Often in the interviews, the tweens would project themselves or hypothetical others into the business world, into a time when they would have a career. They defined the work they do now (i.e., looking good at the mall) as practice for the future (i.e., a professional job), which demonstrates their future-oriented progress narrative. Taite says you have to "show up for the job you're doing." This goes for jobs and for the everyday activities you're engaging, like going to school or the mall.

When describing clothing they liked, the students typically began with the type of clothing. As detailed earlier, Tahira describes her outfit in terms of shirt and pants. Decisions about the type of clothing are closely related to context as well, as Taite details with his differentiation between suits and t-shirts.

The qualities of clothing (color, fit, and style) are also important. In the initial story for this chapter, Brian dresses his character in a shirt that "fits right, not too baggy, but not too tight." Demarco was quick to say that he wasn't going to go out "with some pants at my knees or something." By this he means that he will not wear pants that look too big or show his boxers. Tahira describes her outfit as pink and white. Her tone tells me that she isn't just describing the colors for my benefit but that she really likes these colors and that color plays a large role in her selections.

Finally, the descriptions of clothing are usually summed up with a comment making a general assessment of the outfit. It is nice, cute, fine, tight, or otherwise positively described. Demarco likes "fancy" stuff. Rather than verbally assessing the style of his outfit, Brian takes his hands even to his chest, palms facing the floor and then pushes them down, stopping below his waist to pump his hands twice up and down he says knowingly with a bit of a wink, "you know." And I do; I know he means he is looking good.

Within these references to context, type, qualities, and desirability were factors that commented on gender. Boys spoke most often about the importance of matching,

while girls spoke more about their parents monitoring their clothes to be sure that they were both feminine and modest.

The eighth grade girls nearly all discussed the closely related concepts of modesty and femininity. For the eighth grade girls, modesty is important. Generally, as I discuss in Chapter 7, the girls refused to pass judgment on others about clothing choices, even with prompting from me about hypothetical scenarios. However, a lack of modesty is one thing they would not accept. To wear clothing that was too revealing (i.e., short skirts, low-cut shirts, and shirts that showed the midriff) was unacceptable. When I asked where they learned rules for modesty, the girls said they learned them from their parents, most often their mothers. Modesty is a standard that their mothers instilled in them, and one the girls agree with and accept. This is one of the ways their parents and habitus seeks to discipline their bodies. Although, the tweens fight against a great deal of the normalizing judgment, examination, and hierarchical observation (Foucault, 1977) that surrounds them and their consumer choices, the girls find modesty rules acceptable and as coming from their habitus and cultural capital, rather than the dominant habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Carter, 2003).

Kabira responds with the term “presentable” when I ask her about how she needs to dress when leaving home. When I ask Kabira to tell me what she means by being “presentable,” she responds, “Like not coming in here with a short skirt, inch material. Or like a shirt that’s too revealing. Just present yourself nice. Something you’ll be comfortable, and not uncomfortable, with.”

Thinking I misheard, I ask Kabira, “What material?”

She replies, “That’s what I call it when you got this much material on,” and spreads her fingers barely apart to show me an inch and thus define what she meant by “inch material.” For Kabira a key aspect of being presentable is to be dressed modestly.

In response to a question asking why it is important to look nice, Jacynth creates and comments on a hypothetical job scenario: “Like, if you come with something short on, they’re like, ‘Oh, you’re not going to be a good representative for this company.’” Her father is the standard by which Jacynth judges the modesty of her attire. Earlier in the school year she wore a purple t-shirt to dance class that one of her classmates judged as

too tight, saying, “You’re gonna get in trouble.” When I asked Jacynth about this incident she said, “He [her father] bought it so it was fine.” Her parents have instilled and enforce the value of modesty upon Jacynth, but it is one that she accepts and self-imposes as well. Her she rejected the surveillance of her peers having determined that she was still within the realm of normal because of the judgment of her father. She has internalized this surveillance and operates according to his standards even though he will not see her at school.

The standards of femininity set by their parents are accepted less so than those for modesty. The girls recounted pleading with their parents for bulky boys’ athletic shoes, baggy pants, and oversized t-shirts and jerseys. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 7, the tweens reportedly did not argue with their parents regarding the purchases they were willing to make for them. For instance, if they were told no in a store, they generally dropped their protests to avoid embarrassment and possible punishment and to show respect. Therefore, the girls largely did what their parents wanted in terms of not wearing baggy clothes or large athletic shoes, but did not internalize this norm as they had their parents’ rules for modesty. Unlike in the case of modesty, the girls did not self-surveill, but instead revolted against this norm in thought if not action.

For instance, according to Cala, her mother enforces a standard of femininity that pushes her away from most anything considered boyish or too sexualized. Cala says, “If I like something really baggy or something, like something not really girly, then she’s like, ‘No—that’s not going to work.’ But if it’s too girly and I want these big high-heeled shoes, like stilettos or something, she’s like, ‘No.’ She has to keep me in a range.” Cala’s mother wants her to look feminine, but not like a woman. This range is one that maintains what her mother considers age-appropriate femininity. When I ask Cala how she feels about her mother keeping her “in a range,” she replies, “It’s cool. I mean, she knows what’s best. But sometimes I disagree. But, you know.” She ends this sentence with a shrug to indicate there’s no point in arguing with her mom. Where the girls mentioned modesty and femininity as defining characteristics of what it meant for them to look good, the boys focused attention on matching.

Through modesty and femininity standards, the girls learn how the docile female body looks and much of this understanding is stored in practical consciousness. The girls understand their parents' definition of appropriate femininity to be narrower than their own. They desire to adhere to the standards of their peer habitus and a larger cultural norm for femininity and thus push against their parent's standards. This is quite different from the internalized standards of modesty to which they willingly adhere.

Matching clothing was an important contributor to looking good for both boys and girls, though more often mentioned and elaborated by boys. Taite says,

Now, matching is important, as opposed to back in the 80s where you could just throw on a yellow shirt, some green pants, just go out there. But, nowadays, that's just not what we would call the best outfit. Unless you're not planning to see anybody you know, like if you're just going down the street, that's fine, but not going out to the mall. You have to have at least some matching stuff.

For Taite, as for many of the boys, matching was key to an outfit looking good. Being able to match your clothes turned individual pieces, for instance a shirt and pants, into an outfit. Fit also factored into matching because one aspect of matching is how the fit of each piece aligns and thus influences the aesthetic of the whole. For instance, you cannot wear an overly baggy shirt and fitted pants because you'll look "all uneven" as seventh grader, Norrence says. Matching shows their willingness to conform to standards of normality, to normalizing judgment. However, they are creative in how they do this matching, and larger category of looking good. They are able to create some of their own standards because of their skills.

To Taite, it is necessary to "at least have some matching stuff" because matching means looking good. In other words, if you have taken the time to look good, through attention to the type of clothing appropriate to the situation, to the details of that clothing, modesty and gender appropriateness (especially for girls), matching and fit, you show you *care* about yourself. The tweens understand themselves as showing through dress not just their personal style but also something deeper about who they are and how they feel about themselves. What they are not doing is placing much emphasis on brands or using brands to imbue them with status or other characteristics. By looking good, they are

showing that they have the knowledge and the desire to be presentable to other people, that they care enough to take care of and respect themselves.

Performance of Care

The goal of looking good is to show moral worthiness. The tweens in this study made clear that their efforts toward looking good were in service of getting care and respect from others by showing that they were already cared for by themselves and their families. They spoke extensively and passionately about care, concern, respect, “home training,” and how all these aspects of their current and future selves are communicated to others, both those they know and those they don’t, through looking good. To explain how looking good signals and facilitates care, I’ll first briefly discuss Carol Gilligan’s concept (1993) of the ethic of care and apply it to how the tweens show they care for themselves, that their families care for them, and how this care should signal a right to care from society.

An Ethic of Care

Carol Gilligan (1993) found that women often base their moral reasoning on the ethic of care. They consider how people will be connected, cared for, or helped when determining ethical courses of action. Moral development in women is exemplified by “attention to others’ particular needs and perspectives, avoidance of hurt, and maintenance of attachments as moral goals” (Bardige, Ward, Gilligan, McLean Taylor, & Cohen, 1988, p. 160). From this perspective, the “right thing to do” is identified by considering a decision’s projected effects on individuals, not through individualist, masculine justice or fairness frames. Ethics of care require the acknowledgement that our interests are interconnected and interdependent. To be a good and moral person is to care about one’s relationships and consider them when making decisions, recognizing that our capacity for caring for others and ourselves should be cultivated and enhanced.

Utilizing different methods of moral reasoning leads to different imaginings of the self and identity. Gilligan explains the different way of viewing the self that comes with an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1993; Bardige et al., 1988):

A different way of describing the self, generally confused with a failure of self-definition, has been clarified in recent years by attention to the experience of

women. In this alternative construction, self is known in the experience of connection and defined not by reflection but by interaction, the responsiveness of human engagement. The close tie I have observed between self-description and moral judgment illuminates the significance of this distinction by indicating how different images of self give rise to different visions of moral agency, which in turn are reflected in different ways of defining responsibility. (Bardige et al., 1988, p. 7)

When operating with an ethic of care, one's orientation to the world—her image of self—is seen not as independent and autonomous but deeply enmeshed and connected with others. An ethic of care coincides with an identity of care—one who cares and needs care. This can be seen as a self based on a disidentification (Munoz, 1999). This could be especially important for individuals who, like the tweens, do not have normal identities in the dominant discourse. Because their identities based on race, class, and age are delinquent (Foucault, 1977), basing identities in care for self and others, may be one of the few positive spaces left to base their identities, especially those connected to consumption.

Prior to Gilligan's work (1993), reasoning through care was often seen as a deficiency in moral development. This could arguably still be seen as the popular conception of morality. However, Bardige et al. (1988) found that teens, boys and girls,⁴⁷ in poor, urban areas had advanced moral reasoning skills based in care. Bardige et al. (1988) found that,

More than three-quarters of the interviewees spontaneously mentioned moral considerations in response to at least one of our identity questions. Moral considerations included descriptions of oneself as helpful, sharing, liking to care for little kids, not prejudiced, caring about others, trying to make people feel good, being a sensitive and patient listener, being careful not to say things that hurt other people's feelings, being a peacemaker, avoiding fights, staying out of

⁴⁷ Gilligan says, "The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation . . . but this association is not absolute" (1993, p. 2).

trouble, being obedient and/or helpful to parents, and being a “good” or “decent” kid. (p. 164)

For the teenagers in the Bardige et al. (1988) study, a desire to be cared for and to care for others was a key marker of self-identity. The reliance on an ethic of care can also be seen in the comments of the students at Scholastic Middle, and their consumption and their presentation of self through looking good are necessary to show cared-for selves.

For the students at Scholastic Middle, a desire to be seen as cared-for and as someone who cares for others was a prime motivator toward looking good. It allowed for disidentification (Munoz, 1999), rejecting the status quo hedonist title, while still participating in consumer culture. If we build our identities through consumer goods as many scholars have argued (Bauman, 2005; Crawford, 1992; Dittmar, 2008; Kotlowitz, 1999, 2000; Schor, 1998), the moral aspects of our identity would be at least partially signaled in the same way. A key aspect of the tweens’ moral identities, their legitimacy as cared-for selves, is shown to others through their clothing and overall presentations of self, their chosen commodities, and their use of consumer culture.

Performance of a Cared-For Identity

Looking good enables a positive performance of self. One performs her identity (including moral identity) through appearance and action toward others within the rules and resources of the structures inherent in any given situation and setting (in the case of the U.S.—consumer culture). As discussed in Chapter 4, Goffman’s (1959) theory of impression management holds that identity is created and maintained in front stage/public life through both conscious and unconscious use of tools and strategies employed by the social actor in concert with others. Consumer culture provides many, and arguably the most noticeable and easily read, resources (Giddens, 1986), for developing a front-stage self or identity. Most important for the tweens in this study was that their front-stage identity show *care*.

Pugh (2009) found similar claims to care with children. Pugh takes on Goffman’s (1967) concept of facework, where each individual works in interaction to portray a positive image of self. However, she locates this facework within the individual using it, as it is manifested and performed rather than in interaction. In Pugh’s work with both

poor and affluent children, the “economy of dignity” largely depends on cultural “scrip” gained through an ownership and/or knowledge of consumer culture. Pugh says,

Children collect or confer dignity among themselves, according to their (shifting) consensus about what sorts of objects or experiences are supposed to count for it. . . I use “dignity” to mean the most basic sense of children’s participation in their social world, what the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen called an “absolute capability . . . to take part in the life of the community.” With dignity, children are visible to their peers, and granted the aural space, the very right to speak in their own community’s conversation. (p. 7)

At Pugh’s (2009) field sites, the economy of dignity, the structure in which children are able to speak and participate in their worlds, is animated by the use of tokens of value, or scrip. Cultural scrip varied between more and less affluent field sites and as things came in and out of vogue. However, in all field sites scrip was most often related to knowledge and ownership of elements of popular culture (Pugh, 2009; see Chin, 2001). Scrip also made claims to care by giving the children “an aura of those who received the care, time, and attention of others” (Pugh, 2009, p. 64).

However, unlike scrip, looking good is not primarily based in commodities. It is based in skilled and creative behavior. For the tweens in this study, looking good, like scrip, is a means for belonging. Looking good is also similar to scrip in that it gives solvency in the economy of dignity. Looking good is a way to *claim* care. It shows you care for yourself, that you are cared for by others, and further that you deserve such care. By showing they are deserving of care, the tweens show that they are moral individuals.⁴⁸ Care is shown through “home training.” Home training is defined by fifth grader Demarco as, “When at least somebody teaches you to do the right things and don’t do the wrong things.” Utilizing an ethic of care to understand these complex performances of self shows that the very acts and attitudes regarding the centrality of appearance considered shallow and hedonistic in popular conceptions denote instead care for self and care from family, and further, a right to the care of society.

⁴⁸ The tweens also utilize the ethic of care more directly by using consumption to show care for others, particularly their families, as is discussed in Chapter 7.

Care for Self and Care from Others

To look good is to indicate care and the right for care in three ways: care for self, care from family, and care from unknown others. Although all of these forms of gaining and giving care are connected as elements of both structure and agency, for the sake of explanation they will be separated. Care *for* self and care *from* family will be discussed as they relate more directly to what the tweens pull into their identities and project out to others. The expectation of care from unknown others will also be discussed as it is expected to be the direct result of a cared-for identity.

Much of the effort put into looking good is in the service of creating a cared-for identity. Both self and others care for this cared-for identity. By looking good, tweens show they have the knowledge and the inclination to put their best selves forward. They understand that they are presenting themselves to others and are showing that they care about what others think. The tweens conceptualized self-care through comments including, “you have to keep yourself looking presentable,” “you must show you have “home training,” and you must leave home “looking nice, ready for the day.”

For example, Taite says, “I care about what I look like out in the open.” When I ask him how others perceive him because of this care, he says,

What I think that they would say is that, “He has respect for himself . . . and he has the respect to show that.” I think that really it shows respect for myself more than anything else. But, what I’m really trying to do when I’m out in the open, and I dress nicely is—I’m just trying to have myself, like I said, be more confident. But I guess what they’re saying is that he has more respect for himself, and that he’s going out properly, and that he’s not putting himself like in the stereotypical way out in the open and just—he’s kind of like more having his own style instead of copying what everybody else is doing.

What we hear from Taite is that looking good shows that he has self-respect—that he cares for himself. It is also clear that he knows and attempts to avoid the negative stereotypes of poor, urban, minority youth. He is actively working against these stereotypes by cultivating his own style. He works to make sure his style is not

stereotypical and will not be read as such. Being seen as a respected, cared-for, worthwhile individual is his goal.

Respect comes in up much of the tweens' talk and can often be used interchangeably with care. Although they don't use the adage, the tweens adhere to the idea of "if you don't respect yourself, no one else will." They use their knowledges and skill sets regarding looking good to show care and respect for themselves. For instance, brushing one's hair or ironing one's clothes would be a sign of care if someone did it for you. The tweens speak of these same acts as also showing self-respect when they do these tasks themselves.

Brian's comments illustrate the dynamics of self-care.

Like, if I'm going to a meeting, and I'm wearing some messed up clothes and people know that I have better clothes, and stuff, people like get the wrong perception of me and think of me as like I don't care, I don't care about myself, and I don't carry myself at a good, I don't carry myself the way I'm supposed and that I just don't care.

For Brian, there is a way he is "supposed to" carry himself. Carrying himself encompasses how he dresses, his attitude, and the way he holds his body. Using the term "supposed" signals an external framework for behavior that he must live up to. Self-care and respect are key to the adequate performance of the docile body in Brian's habitus. He has internalized these rules; therefore, this framework is his own, but he also has a responsibility to it—a responsibility to himself to portray himself well.

Looking good is not about status consumption or standing out for the purpose of status, which is the commonly understood purpose for how poor, urban, minority youth dress (see Chin, 2001; Kotlowitz, 1999, 2000; Nightingale, 1993; Pugh, 2009). Looking good indicates that you have respect for yourself and because of that you take the time to care for yourself. However, self-care is not a matter of agency alone. Knowing the rules enables looking good, and caring and knowledgeable families teach structural rules and resources. Care from family is required for and displayed in looking good and creating cared-for identities.

Someone taking time to iron your clothes or groom your hair shows that they have enough respect for you and themselves to believe you should look good out in the world. Looking good indicates that you have a family that cares about “home training.” When asked why others sometimes don’t leave their homes looking presentable, Kabira responds in a tone of shame and sadness that their “moms probably never told them,” meaning that their moms had not given them proper home training. The tweens speak of their parents (primarily their mothers) as attempting to provide the best opportunities for them by aiding in their self-presentation, by doing what they can to provide them with the means to look good and make good impressions.

Home training also shows that you receive love, respect, and care from your parents. It shows that they pay you time and attention. The tweens saw love as at least part of the reason their parents bought them things, however the most important aspects of love and care came about in terms of time and attention. Taking the time to look at you and to teach you signaled care. It is the care given to you by your family that looking good represents. You look good because they taught you about matching, modesty, fit, and wearing clothing that fits the occasion.

Pugh (2009) claims that the reasons the children she worked with tried so hard to show they were cared for is because they feared they might not be. Interactions with the tweens at Scholastic Middle show that this statement needs clarification. Other than Reed and Damien who did not believe their families cared for them enough, the students never gave me reason to believe they were not fully convinced of their parents’ love for and dedication to them. They felt a great debt to their parents for all the care they received and spoke extensively of how much their parents did for them. They were not afraid that their parents did not care for them.

However, I do believe that Pugh’s (2009) observation that children feared they were not cared for is true in terms of the care they get from society. They receive indications from both media and the state of their neighborhoods and schools (those before Scholastic Middle) that they and people like them are not cared for by society. They are disparaged, ignored, and ridiculed based on race, class, taste, and mythical consumption. Working to show care for self and from family by looking good is creates

self-respect and is also meant to garner respect from strangers. The tweens' care for themselves and from their families is displayed by looking good not simply to reinforce their own understandings of the moral worthiness that comes with looking good, but to gain further care from others. It is disidentification; they are trying to negotiate a dominant majority that does not otherwise grant them legitimate space (Foucault, 1977; Munoz, 1999). The work the tweens put into managing their presentations of self is front stage, not back stage work (Goffman, 1959). Positive presentations of self are meant to positively affect a public audience. The tweens are showing that they have the necessary script to participate in the larger culture's economy of dignity.

Conclusion

The tweens of Scholastic Middle utilize the rules and resources of consumer structure to create cared-for identities. They create these identities not through self-centered, violent, or hedonistic consumption or a focus on brands. They cultivate the skills necessary to have a distinct style that will communicate self-respect and care from families in order to (hopefully) gain care and respect from society in general. Rather than being unaware of and in any way disrespectful to a society that disrespects them, they use the limited resources at their disposal in ways that garner them and their families some modicum of respect and care in return. However, displaying the care that one has for oneself and receives from family is only part of the way the tweens at Scholastic Middle utilize consumption to show care. They also use both consumption and the denial of their own consumer desires to show care for their families, especially their mothers. It is this care for others that is the subject of Chapter 7.

Chapter 7

Taking Care: Consuming and Not Consuming for Others

Christmas Realities

I blink back tears as Kabira matter-of-factly tells me about Christmas. Kabira is one of the few eighth grade girls with whom I have not become close. As my emotional connection with her story takes physical form as a rock in my stomach, I realize I have misread her. I took her frivolity and high spiritedness as an indicator of shallowness and perhaps even selfishness. I now realize I am looking at a girl who would give nearly anything to make her mother happy.

I began our interview by asking her where and with whom she lives. As she tells me about her family, Kabira makes it clear that being the oldest of six siblings, three of whom live with her, her mother, and her stepdad, means she takes on a great deal of responsibility. Kabira tells me about her frugality; she is straightforward and mature. She likes to save her money for larger purchases or to buy others presents.

I see myself at her age, although Kabira is a more giving version, a better version. Given her talk of presents and the fact that we are at the beginning of December, I assume Christmas will prove a fruitful topic. “Are you excited about Christmas then?” I ask.

Kabira pauses, and I see my folly. If she is like my tween self, she doesn’t want to talk about Christmas. Christmas for her family doesn’t look or sound like the images on television. I think I should turn away from this line of questioning when she responds. “Umm, oh, I’m alright, but I know my mom. She’s probably not going to get me a lot of stuff. Because she’s . . .” Kabira fades off and looks at her hands. “I don’t ask my mom for anything unless she can really do it. Unless I really need it, I don’t ask my mom for anything.”

As she pauses again, I want to tell her she doesn’t have to talk about it. I want to stop her so she doesn’t have to think about it. I want to stop her so I don’t have to think

about it. But I also realize that she's living this reality whether she says so or not. I want her to talk about it, not just as a researcher, but as someone who's been there, someone who can tell her that I know it's hard, that if she hits the right combination of dumb luck and hard work it can get better. So I breathe, swallow down the panic, and wait. And she goes on.

"I think that she's all overwhelmed a lot, in a lot of stuff. So I don't . . ." Kabira pauses, as if searching for the right words. "If she's going to get me something, then I thank her for that, but I wouldn't be mad, or expect a present or something like that," she says, biting off the last word with a sense of finality.

Since Kabira seems a bit lost about how to continue, I volunteer, "When I was a kid there were four of us, and my mom was just by herself trying to take care of us, and we didn't have much money. I remember sometimes, even though I tried to be as mature as you sound like you're being, I was so . . ." I fade off, knowing I should say I was mean and catty, but not wanting to admit that to her. I settle on saying, "I would never tell her, 'Oh, this Christmas sucked,' but I remember I would see all that stuff in the ads and then I would get socks."

My self-disclosure pays off for both of us. I feel better about her disclosure because I've reciprocated my own story. Kabira jumps in with a slight smile, "I used to do that. Like my grandmother, she'll get me my basic needs, like everybody needs a couple bras or something like that. She just gives me my basic needs and not my wants."

I nod, and she continues, "Or something that I really need."

I ask partly as a researcher and partly as someone who simply wonders how others dealt with the same experiences I did, "You just don't get disappointed by that anymore?"

"No, I used to. But, now I understand. Because even though my dad [her stepdad], he takes care of the kids, but he doesn't have a job. And my mom, she works all the time. She works nonstop. She'll work the whole day, and sometimes she'll be tired. All she does is come home and sleep. And it's like we never get time to talk to her sometimes. But, sometimes she will take time to have fun with us, even though she's sleepy and all that. I thank her for that and all, but she . . ." Kabira looks for the right words, "she seems

so overwhelmed. Like she has to pay the bills, and sometimes she don't have enough money." She pauses for a second to tie her thoughts together. "I look up to her."

"Why do you look up to her?" I ask.

"She just turned 28 and she has four kids. She has rent that costs like \$1150, and she works back-to-back, nonstop. I don't know how she does it. She just does, and it gets done. I don't know how."

I swallow. I am 28 years old. The rock in my stomach forms again, this time for Kabira's mother. I can't imagine her life. I'm even more in awe when Kabira tells me that her mom is a psychiatric nurse in a mental hospital and that she used to work in a juvenile detention center. I tell Kabira I admire her mom and she beams. I feel sure that she has never taken a compliment aimed at her with this much satisfaction. I take this opportunity to ask about Kabira's siblings. "Do you think your younger sisters and brother understand your mother being overwhelmed the way you do?"

"No, I try to tell Cassandra. She likes to nag and go out all the time . . . I don't think she understands how mom works all the time. I try to sit her down and tell her that mommy doesn't have the time sometimes to do what she would normally do."

I nod, picturing her sister Cassandra, who is two years her junior and a sixth grader at Scholastic Middle. Like many of the sibling groups at the school, their relationship seems built on a sense of respect and rapport, without much friction. I ask, "What does Cassandra want her to do?"

Kabira's replies come quickly now although we are still talking about some sensitive issues. "Go out to the park with her. Go get her some shoes. Or just go outside and have fun with her friends and stuff. But she's . . . I mean we try to make her understand, and it's my little brother too. We try to make them understand all the time, but I guess they got to grow up and see."

Other Care

Kabira's story shows identity and relationships are built and understood in, through, and around consumption. Care, especially, is shown in consumption. Kabira tries to protect her mother from her desires so that she doesn't feel overwhelmed. Kabira further attempts to protect her mother by telling her younger siblings not to ask for time

or things. Kabira wants time and attention from her mother, not things. A large part of her family role focuses on denying her own consumer desires, emphasizing harmony and time spent together with her family, and teaching her siblings to do the same.

Differentiating the identities we build for ourselves (our egos or inner identities) from our social identities (the roles we play for others) is difficult. Social identities and egos overlap and intertwine making any distinctions purely conceptual. In Chapter 6, I discussed the work these tweens do to create cared for, good, and worthwhile identities for themselves through looking good. This chapter moves on to highlight work the tweens do in relationships to protect and care for others through their control and understanding of consumption.

Care for Family

Chin (2001) found that the poor, minority children she observed in Newhallville, Connecticut, utilized consumption to maintain social networks. She says, “Consumption is an important medium through which many of these children’s everyday social and kin relationships are created and maintained” (p. 88). Scholastic Middle students maintain relationships by monitoring their consumer desires and financially contributing to their care. These students hold an understanding of consumption that is “deeply social, where individual needs and desires must always be measured and evaluated in reference to those of others” (Chin, p. 70). This orientation endorses the view that shopping or provisioning itself is seen as an act of love. Miller (1998) describes shopping as a sacrifice, a ritual in which relationships are maintained by connecting expenditure with love and care. The tweens receive care from and show care for their families through an awareness of the connections between consumption and care.

The tweens show familial care through consumption in several ways. The tweens understand “looking good” as enabled by consumption and as a reflection on and of their families. They wanted to give their parents gifts or other material indications of their affection for them. In addition, the tweens curbed their parents’ knowledge of the tweens’ desires for goods. All of these caring acts come together to show their understanding of teamwork as a metaphor for family life and the curbing of consumption as a way to improve everyone’s “game.”

Proving Home Training

The tweens talked about themselves as being responsible for others, including their parents. This responsibility and thus care is shown in several ways. One way is by “looking good” in public, which reflects well on the “home training” their parents have provided. Home training is their habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), the standards informally learned as a member of their social class.⁴⁹ Looking good is possible only through knowledge of and an ability to enact complex processes of wearing the appropriate clothes in the appropriate manner, caring for those clothes, grooming, and behaving well. Home training informs the tweens knowledge of and ability to utilize these methods of looking good. Therefore, looking good does not happen by accident, but through complex processes and attention to detail, and looking good signals good home training to public others.

Home training creates knowledge in both discursive and practical consciousness. The tweens readily talk about the importance of matching, a discursive knowledge. Taite uses matching as key tool when he shops and says, “If I have one pair of pants, I’ll buy three different shirts that’ll go with that one pair of pants, so that I’ll have not just one thing. So that I’ll have a lot of other clothes to wear.”

The tweens, however, go beyond doing as they have been taught. They enact behaviors that directly or indirectly indicate their appreciation for this training, which in turn communicates gratitude towards parents for providing home training. Many of the students described this appreciation as one of the reasons they give their parents respect and love. The tweens showed their respect and care for their parents by being “good.” Being good means both communicating respectfully with their parents and behaving well in public. Fifth grader Demarco is insistent on the importance of not arguing with his mother about buying things in public. He says, “Because if you was in the store, that’s public, and your mom taught you everything you know right now, so why would you argue in the store where everybody can see you?”

I ask Demarco if he would get in more trouble for arguing in public than in private. He replies, “Yes, ‘cause then other people would see you, and they might not

⁴⁹ Habitus was also addressed in chapter 4 and home training in chapter 6.

think you have any home training.” Although the lines between private and public communication often dictate that some conversations, and most arguments, occur in private to save face or for various other reasons (Goffman, 1959, 1967), Demarco’s reasoning is very specific. He is not to argue with his mother because it would reflect badly on her ability to teach him right from wrong. He says, “Cause if I was to argue they [others in the store] would think why would she have me being that I’m so bad and stuff? And she raised me good. Why would I waste all of that, then just feel bad about myself, cause my mom is sad?” Demarco would make his mother sad not only because he was not behaving well, but also because others would see this behavior and judge her harshly and inaccurately. Demarco is cognizant of the surveillance that not only surrounds him, but his mother and realizes there are punishments for them both should they behave in ways not sanctioned by normalizing judgment.

Demarco sees himself as responsible for displaying to others the good manners and respect his mother taught him. His mother’s care for him deserves reciprocation through care and respect in the way he communicates with her, even when he is disappointed. Respect is important in backstage communication, but has added dimensions in front stage communication. Bad behavior discredits the front stage performance devised by Demarco and his family. In addition to communication with and around parents, tweens looking good and performing according to the standards of their home training is important when parents are not around. These behaviors show care for their parents’ reputations, even their reputations with unknown parties. Looking good to show respect is connected at least partially to consumption. If the students look good and behave according to their home training, they will be judged as normal, as docile bodies, and their parents will be judged the same. To act out in public is to fail examination for both themselves and their parents.

Parents understand, just as children do, that “consumption acts as a symbolic language through which buyers make connections to others” (Pugh, 2009, p. 15). Pugh found that parents, regardless of economic class, lamented their children’s materialism. However, the role that consumption and knowledge of popular culture plays in the economy of dignity for children is something to which parents respond. Therefore,

parents buy things to help their children fit in and believe across class and race differences that this is an important aspect of their parenting.

In fact, tweens perceive care from their parents in direct relation to buying. Demarco admits that he doesn't have a lot of clothes he really likes because he "has to be grateful for what my mom buys me." He says, "If I wasn't grateful, I would probably be more selfish-like and not get nothing, besides being grateful and having a lot of things and not arguing." When I ask Demarco why he must show his appreciation for the things his mother buys him, he says, "Because if it wasn't for my mom, I would probably be doing something bad." For Demarco, questions about buying lead directly into talk about morality, being a good person, and care for his mother. He connects what she buys him and his reactions to it with all that she has taught him. Tweens positive reactions to consumption come partly from an understanding of what it takes to support a person's needs as well as wants.

The tweens are grateful that their parents provide necessities like food, electricity, clothes, and transportation and contribute financially when possible or necessary. When I ask eighth grader Brian what he would do with \$20, he says, "I'm a big saver. Any kind of money I have or I get, I save. 'Cause most of the time, when I save my money, my mom borrows it." Brian says this with no longing to change the situation. Brian sees helping his mom financially as one of his family roles.

Taite's comments illustrate a key aspect of both the tweens understanding of the way spending on necessities is accomplished on their behalf and how this spending can put a strain on their parents' finances. In response to my question, "Would your mom ever say that you couldn't have something, or you couldn't go shopping because she couldn't afford it?" he says,

All the time. All the time we do that, cause we buy a lot of other stuff, just aside from shopping, because I eat a lot. So that's what we mostly say, 'What's more important, clothes or food?' And normally, yeah, it's food. Food wins.

I ask Taite if there are other bills to worry about besides food, and he says,

Yeah. Two cell phone bills, car payment bill, . . . and we paid off the house. So, that's fine and good. So, that's over. It's about time we did that one. And, also the electric. I'm always running that one up.

Taite's use of "we"⁵⁰ is one I've heard from other students and illustrates his understanding of his family as people meant to depend on each other. I say, "You keep saying 'we,' like 'we paid all this off'."

He responds, "Yes. I like kick in from some of my jobs that I do." Taite takes responsibility for his family by contributing financially when he can. Like his classmate Brian, he doesn't consider these financial contributions a burden, but part of his role in the family.

Tweens understand the financial burden their education places on their families. Scholastic Middle tuition is mostly paid for by scholarships and government vouchers. However, families still have to pay activity fees of \$15 per month, buy uniforms, and either drive their children to school or pay for bus fare. Rather than expecting their parents to pay for these needs as a part of their duty as parents, the tweens felt grateful for the financial support. Students often spoke about the work their parents did to put gas in the car to drive them to school everyday, and how expensive their uniforms were. Tahira exclaims, "My uniforms are expensive! The shirts are like \$17 or \$20 each. I wouldn't pay that for any shirt!" Tahira shows that this is a significant amount of money to spend on a shirt, an amount perhaps even antithetical to home training and yet her mother is willing to do this for her. However, behaving according to their home training and being grateful are not the only ways of showing care for parents. Like Kabira's desire to save her money to buy presents for others, the tweens aspired to purchase things for their families, especially their mothers, to show love and appreciation.

Giving Gifts

Buying for others is another way that consumer culture wends its way into family relationships and our identities. Millman (1991) says,

⁵⁰ This use of "we" is similar to the "we" I used to encourage students to interact and speak with me during the research process. His easy and complete use of the term shows how fully integrated he sees his family. This feeling of integration and comraderie is what I tried to create when using the term.

In families, as well as courtship, a present is often taken as a sign of feeling or even character . . . We joke about it, but in the family, as in the marketplace, money is often the measure of every reality, including love. (p. 6)

The tweens appreciate what their parents buy for them and consider this expression of appreciation among their central responsibilities in the family. In this way, students show that they care about others. I asked nearly all participants what they would do if I gave them \$20. Their responses largely fit my assumptions regarding tween priorities. They said save it, buy some clothes, or go to the movies. However, an unexpected answer the tweens provided most frequently and enthusiastically was that they would buy something for their mothers. Eighth grader Tahira expressed this sentiment:⁵¹

I would save half of it first . . . I think with the other half I would go out and buy something nice for my momma, cause I think she deserves it. Because she . . . never gets any rest. Like, she's always on the go . . . She works around the corner from my school, but she have to pick me up, take me to step practice, then she go all the way back home, then come all the way back over there to pick me up, and then she goes to my step shows. She have to go to my brother's basketball games. Like, she never gets any rest. So I would buy her something nice.

Further, the tweens wanted to buy something meaningful for their family members. Tahira indicates this in an abstract way by saying she'd like to buy something "nice." Kabira lists specific Christmas presents she hopes to buy for all of her siblings and goes into great detail concerning her brother. Nearly tripping over her words with excitement, she says,

I was going to get my brother, he likes Spider-man, I was going to get him, 'cause we just moved into our new apartment, I was going to decorate his room with Spiderman. And get, you know how they have like little light-up stickers that light up at night? I might get the Spider-man like that.

⁵¹ This sentiment is in line with what Chin (2001) found when she took younger children shopping. Nearly all the children spent some of the money she gave them on their parents and siblings. This act is surely to show gratitude but also reflects that these are the most significant relationships in children's lives.

Kabira's excitement reaches a peak not when she considers the prospect of getting something for herself, but when she discusses purchasing something for her brother.

This sense of care for others enacted through consumption echoes what Chin (2001) found with younger children in similar life circumstances.

Gifts were an effort to reciprocate with care and caring and at the same time allowed kids to show that they were competent in meting out material resources in ways that served not only material ends, but social ones as well. (p. 139)

For Kabira and the others, buying gifts for family members shows they care about them. However, their spending ideas about these gifts are immanently practical. Before telling me about her brother's gift, Kabira says, "I was going to get my sister a LeapFrog, but I don't know. I might have to look at them. They might be expensive." Kabira's comment signals that she will dismiss the idea if it is too expensive. Kabira recognized that the LeapFrog might prove unattainable and wanted to find a meaningful substitute.

The tweens also went beyond behaving according to their home training, expressing appreciation for consumption undertaken on their behalf, and gift giving in caring for their families. Students also understood their performances of consumer desire affected the happiness of others in their families.

Denying Desire

Kabira's story at the beginning of this chapter was one of the most poignant stories of denying desire, but it was by no means the only story. Many of the students talked about showing care for their parents by denying entirely or significantly downplaying their desires for purchasing clothes and toys, attending social events, and even for certain types of food. There were several levels of denial. Often the tweens described a nearly simultaneous desire and denial; the product or other consumable is known, worthy, and impossible to attain (pure denial). In the second type of denial, the object of desire is possible to attain in some ideal or nearly ideal financial circumstance, but the tween recognized that current circumstances made the object unattainable (conditional denial). A third type of denial happened when the tween asked a parent for something and then downplayed the importance of the item when they found out that the purchase of the object proved difficult for their parents (downplaying denial). Finally,

parents simply saying no to requests required a caring reaction on the part of the tweens (parental denial).

Pure denial is not unheard of for most children or, for that matter, adults. Many objects are impossible to obtain. I imagine that the vast majority of us, regardless of family financial status, who left the zoo wanting a monkey didn't get one. However, the types of things that might seem impossible to these tweens were varied and often easily attainable with a moderate income; for instance, seeing a *trip* to the zoo as impossible. Another example is Kabira's dismissal of the possibility of purchasing the LeapFrog, which costs around \$20, with books in the \$10 range. Kabira never approached her mother or sister regarding this toy; she simply found it unattainable and moved on, presumably seeking out other alternatives. Students at Scholastic Middle were adept at these transitions to alternative courses of action.

Pure denial combined with the other forms of denial takes a toll on the tweens' self-esteem and relationships with their parents. Pure denial also requires the kind of self-control not expected from a group with such a hedonistic consumer identity. Hedonism, after all, is pleasure seeking and solipsistic.

Conditional denial occurred when the tween understood that the object could possibly be attained during ideal or nearly ideal financial circumstances in their family,⁵² but that it could not be attained currently. In this case, the tweens waited for those ideal circumstances in one of two ways, either by telling their parents about the item and hoping for it at a later date when circumstances improved or by waiting for improved circumstances to ask for the item.

The tweens expected to wait for their parents to get paid, or wait until the bills were paid, or for a tax refund or other type of influx of cash into the family. Often when I asked them if there was anything they wanted to buy right now, they followed their answer with some indication of when they expected to get it; for instance, when my

⁵² The ideal circumstances for their family were a mixture of reality and fantasy. The tweens often couldn't name any concrete previous point that the item could have been obtained. Conditional denial was often part of a future-oriented progress narrative as befits their status as late modern individuals, for example, when my mom gets her raise or changes jobs, or when we get some extra money.

grandpa comes to visit. Sometimes these time expectations were relatively solid, such as when my mom gets paid again. Others were vague, such as when my mom has some extra money. The tweens did not have a problem with this type of delayed gratification. Brian says his mom often gives him a date that she'll have both time and money to go to the mall, which he accepts. Alexander says his mom often defers buying to the next birthday, Christmas, or income tax refund.

This situation of expecting things with larger, often unsteady or unpredictable influxes of cash is what Pugh (2004) calls "windfall child rearing." Pugh found that the unpredictability of income influenced family finances and therefore relationships as much as having a limited income. The instability caused by limited opportunities led to a dependence on government assistance, part-time or seasonal work, money from friends and family, and the "caprice of fortune" (p. 240). Pugh found this "windfall" money status meant that parents lost a "critical source of parent-child connectedness during periods of high conflict," removed money from a role in "behavior modification," and created images of "parental helplessness," which plays into race and class stereotypes (p. 242). She argues that these effects play into an understanding of money and financial success as based in luck rather than hard work.

The tweens did not refer to their parents as ineffectual even though they obviously lived with conditional, "windfall" buying.⁵³ However, the tween's role in caring for their parents by showing good home training, would extend to their conversations with me. They would not want to "act out" and open their parents up to normalizing judgment through me by telling me that their parents weren't providing for them or were ineffectual. If anything, I heard the opposite, with much of their talk focusing on how hard parents worked. In Kabira's story, we hear how her mom, "Works all the time. She works nonstop. She'll work a whole day." It is obvious that she sees her mother as working, and therefore earning money for Kabira and her siblings, most of her waking moments. Tahira says of her mom, "She's always on the go." For Tahira this "on the go"

⁵³ Pugh could also be overestimating the connections that middle-class parents maintain between buying and behavior. I don't personally know any parents who are thoroughly consistent in their insistence upon proper behavior before buying for their children.

is about both the work her mother gets paid for doing and the work she does to keep Tahira and her brother in school and activities.

The tweens engaged in the second form of conditional denial—to wait for a windfall or other type of positive financial circumstance before asking for what they desired—partly because they understood how hard their parents worked. Brian explains how he waits to ask his mother for things:

If I know she doesn't have the money to get it, I won't ask for it. But if I know that she has the money for it, she be like 'Brian, Saturday I'll take you to the mall, and you can buy what you want.' As long as she has the money, and I'm doing good school-wise and everything else, she'll buy it for me.

He explains why he takes his mother's finances into consideration by saying,

'Cause I know that sometimes my mom really doesn't have it [money] like other people do. So I really don't pressure her to get me something. So if I ask her and she says she doesn't have the money, I'll just be like, "Okay." 'Cause I don't like asking her for stuff if I know she doesn't have the money, 'cause my mom's like real emotional. She'll start crying or something. She gets stressed out about all that stuff.

To avoid upsetting his mother, Brian does not ask for things until he believes she has the available money. Not all students said their parents directly told them about money problems. As Cala says, "You just know," indicating that stress regarding household spending doesn't need explicit statement. Demarco indicates that his mother "hides stuff" regarding financial matters from him, but he finds out anyway.

Despite all their work to understand the financial situations of their parents and their willingness to deny their own desires to fulfill their role in caring for the family, sometimes previously possible desires become impossible and relationship maintenance must take place. These moments require downplaying desires.

Downplaying known desires was a frequent and delicate matter for the tweens. Finances can become precarious for those with even comfortable incomes with little or no notice. The number one reason for bankruptcies in the U.S. is illness and health care bills (Himmelstein, Warren, Thorne, & Woolhandler, 2005). The frequency, duration,

and significance of these chaotic circumstances increase when dealing with limited finances. Because of this volatility, the tweens often faced revisions to the family's finances after they already made their consumer desires known. In these cases, the tweens worked to diminish their parents' perception of the importance of the item to them. As shown earlier in his comments, Brian tries to avoid asking his mother for things when he knows she doesn't have the money. However, he sometimes doesn't read the financial situation fully and must backtrack on his requests. He says,

If I wanted something and she just didn't have the money to get it for me, I won't pout or nothing. I'll just, in my head, I'll be like, 'Man, I really wanted that,' but I won't show it. 'Cause I know she's gonna hurt bad.

Brian is careful not to show disappointment. Of course, the tweens also cited circumstances where self-censoring regarding consumer desires was not necessary. Parents also said no to requests.

Tweens generally accepted their parents simply saying no to purchases and believed denials were made for two main reasons. First, because the desired item did not fit with family values—for example revealing clothing in the case of girls or because the item was expensive and thus a waste of family resources. Second, parents also said no because of structural constraints like finances. However, denying requests was not the object of a power struggle.

By and large, the tweens saw their parents as legitimate authority figures. This legitimacy came about partly because of the care parents showed their children. For instance, Brian did not worry about waiting to get things because when his mother had the money to buy him something she would remember what he wanted and initiate its purchase. Brian believed stated financial constraints were real and purchasing promises would be kept. His mother showed him consistent care in this regard.

The only participant unwilling to wait for things was seventh grader, Reed. He did not believe his great-aunt, denied him consumer items for legitimate reasons. He thought she treated him unfairly in general by being nicer, paying more attention to, and buying more for his cousins (her grandchildren). Reed's unwillingness to wait patiently and

without complaint stemmed from perceptions that he was not seen as important and valuable, or cared for, by his family.

The tweens employed self-control in these situations. I ask Brian if he or his peers would be able to get what they wanted by crying and screaming and he says yes. He responds, "All of our parents will." He knows that if his mother thinks it is important to him, she will often buy him things even against her judgment. For Brian, accepting his mother's denial is about respect and caring. When I ask him what he thinks about kids who cry and scream after hearing "no," he says, "They just need to grow up a little bit or something. 'Cause the parents have more important things to do, like pay bills and the more needed stuff."

The tweens viewed accepting denial by parents as part of their duty to both parents and siblings. Maturely dealing with other forms of self-control and self-denial (pure denial, conditional denial, and downplaying denial) were also a part of this duty. The tweens performed their duty to their families by not being demanding or misbehaving, even when a parental "no" was conditional.

In many ways these various forms of denial are a part of the tween's habitus. However, they differ significantly from those discussed thus far in that the connection of denial to home training is held in practical consciousness. Looking good and other forms of care were clearly articulated by the tweens as rules they had been taught. These rules were held in discursive consciousness. However, they spoke of denying their desires as something they did without their parents' knowledge. It is not that home training did not teach these lessons, simply that they were not articulated. Denial was a form of self-discipline although no less a result of the disciplining structure and the rewards and punishments that accompany the docile body. These forms of denial, showing home training, showing appreciation for home training, and gift giving all fit into their understanding of their role in the family as a team member, as someone with a responsibility to take care of others on the team.

Teamwork as Family Metaphor

The tweens understood their families through the metaphor of teamwork. According to Yerby (1989), "A family metaphor can be defined as a specific image,

event, object, or behavior that represents for the family some aspect of their experience” (p. 43). Metaphors help family members explain how their relationships are experienced and can assign “‘identities’ to particular relationships in the family and to the family as a whole” (p. 43). In addition to words or phrases used as family metaphors, actions can also hold metaphorical and representational value for the family. There are three types of metaphors: metaphors as representational acts, as collective images for the family, and as connecting links between events and meaning (Yerby, 1989).

Representational acts metaphors are behaviors with metaphoric content (i.e., buying a present to make someone feel better). These representational acts often operate as “constitutive rules” or “how meanings at one level of abstraction count as meanings at another” (Pearce and Cronen, 1980, p. 141). Constitutive rules help us assign meaning to sensory inputs or behaviors. For many families, and certainly for the tweens I worked with, the act of purchasing or consuming on one’s behalf is a representational act of love (Miller, 1998).

Collective image metaphors are “symbols, adjectives, or events that are descriptive of the family as a unit” (Yerby, p. 47-48). These are also called “relational metaphors,” and they help us to understand the “subjective sense-making of participants as they construct their relationships” (Owen, 1985, p. 10). These are metaphors for the collective experience of a family and reflect the “family’s value system and world view” (Yerby, p. 48). This is the type of metaphor in which the understanding of the family as a team most clearly fits. Teams depend on support, helpfulness, and each player doing her best to reach the goals of the team, not for personal glory. Demarco becomes upset when his mom, “hides stuff from the team,” because he wants to be trusted and relied upon. His mother threatens his vision of the family as a team when she insists on dealing with problems alone. In the case of the tweens, and their interactions with consumer culture, part of being a member of the team is controlling one’s own desires so as not to put emotional or financial stress on other members of the team, particularly parents. Being part of the team and having a positive identity as a team member means caring for and about the other members’ needs and feelings. Another aspect of this team role is to utilize

consumer culture well (attending to spending, style, and quality standards) to create a self who looks good, and therefore reflects well on the family.

The final type of family metaphor is the connecting links metaphor. This type of metaphor “involve[s] a process of translating or framing a specific experience or event into meaning for the family” (Yerby, 1989, p. 49). In the case of the tweens and consumption, they interpret the events of getting or not getting the consumer goods they desire as about both love and necessity and as part and parcel of their role on the team. Kabira’s interpretation of Christmas and its meaning is a connecting links metaphor. Despite the popular images of Christmas as ornamental, present-laden, extravagant, and set apart from everyday life, Kabira’s Christmas does not fit this mold. Rather than focusing on the lack of these things in her holiday, she has come to see Christmas as representative of how hard her mom works to provide for the family and also what Kabira can contribute. Kabira steps in to try to get things for her siblings that they will like, but that will not cost a great deal. In response to my asking if she will get presents for her siblings, Kabira excitedly replies, “Yeah! I always buy them something for Christmas!” and quickly follows with the list of things she’s clearly been thinking about for some time. Therefore, this holiday represents love and dependence on one another.

These types of family metaphors—representational acts, collective images, and collective links—are seen in the way the family consumes and relates to each other based on that consumption. The tweens described their decisions regarding consumption as dependent upon the collective image of the family as a team. Teams act to support each other. The tweens worked to always give their very best in terms of limiting their expectations and expressing their appreciation regarding consumption. By doing this they maintain positive images of themselves as team members and aren’t forced to, as Demarco puts it, “to feel bad about” themselves. However, these are not their only roles in the team.

In addition to limiting their desires to protect their parents from their disappointment, the tweens often expected their parents to let them help with at least the emotional burden of bills.

Contributing Emotionally to the Team

When I ask Demarco if his family ever talked about money stress he responds, “Sometimes, because if we can’t pay our bills, we really don’t know what we’re going to do.” I follow up by asking him why he is using the term “we.” He says,

Because we brought into this world to help people and at least love what you got, and so we all should probably just be a team, because it’s the best thing to do, because life is really not that long.

I go on to ask him if he personally feels like a financial stressor on his family. He responds, “Yes. Because probably if we have money problems, I’m thinking what we’re going to do and stuff.” His response to my question is not an answer about how he adds to family financial stress, but how he feels stress regarding finances. I then ask Demarco if his mother tries not to tell him about money problems so he won’t be “stressed.” He says unequivocally, “Yes,” and then goes on to say, “It makes me feel better, but it still makes me feel bad, because my mom is still hiding stuff from the team.” Demarco wants his mother to count on him more than he wants her to protect him from their financial realities. He wants to show his care for and help the team. He wants to fulfill his identity in the group.

The tweens showed their care, and repaid the care given to them, by doing their best to behave as full and responsible members of the family team. This attention to the ways that consuming affected their relationships did not end with their families but extended to their friends as well.

Care for Friends

Another primary social experience where the tweens care for others through consumption is friendship. The tweens show care for their friends through sharing, soliciting for consumption on their behalf, and reserving judgment.

First, it’s important to revisit the school environment in which the students find themselves. Scholastic Middle’s school day runs from 7am to 6pm Monday through Thursday and 7am to 5pm on Fridays. They have a mandatory four-week summer program and once-a-month Saturday fieldtrips during the school year. This all adds up to the students spending a great deal of their time together. In addition, each cohort spends

their class day, study hall hours, and often their extracurriculars together for three to four years. Add in classes that begin with around 15 students and can end up with as few as eight or nine by their eighth grade year, and you have a small group of students who have bonded in significant ways.

The students showed care for one another throughout the time I spent with them. If a student got into trouble with a teacher, the others were there for comfort, whether the more overt and obvious comforts like hugging, hair stroking, hand holding, or comforting words employed more often by the girls or the less direct, joking comfort more often employed by the boys. Acts of caring also included acts of consumption such as sharing.

Sharing

Although protective of their possessions, the students also enjoyed sharing things, sometimes through loans. Often the girls would loan each other their jewelry (despite the school rules prohibiting all but a small amount of jewelry) for the day. At lunch or during down time, the girls would play with each other's hair and exchange hair accessories. I did not see as much of this type of sharing amongst the boys, but I did see them sharing pencils and other school supplies. The girls' were joyful about sharing, while the older boys addressed sharing without much emotion. However, the fifth and sixth grade boys' sharing usually came only after a direct request and generally accompanied a strong performance of sacrifice that included taking time to dig out the pencil or paper, looking it over with longing before sighing and giving it to another boy. Sharing seemed to be a part of their habitus, which explains why the younger boys did it even though they did not seem to want to.

Beyond loans, the students were very happy to share any small goods they received. For instance, in the first study hall I attended with the eighth grade girls, Cala had a set of new pencils. They were bright and decorated with images of ducks, bunnies, dolphins, monkeys, and kittens. Without being asked, she went from desk to desk asking each of her classmates, ten in total, which pencil they liked the most. She included all of her classmates and, to my surprise, me. Although I had little use for such a glamorous pencil, I graciously accepted one decorated with monkeys and bananas leaving Cala with

one remaining pencil. Not only had she given all but one of her pencils away, but she also made her gifts without first picking her favorite.

The students also shared smuggled candy, undermining the campus-wide ban. Students handed out candy indiscriminately. The giver did not take into account the strength of friendships in their sharing. In addition, the giver usually left with very little after completing the distribution.

Loaning jewelry or giving pencils and candy may seem like small gestures. However, these things often represent a significant financial outlay for the students and their families and are symbolically important goods to the tweens. Panicked cries often overtook the room when a student couldn't find a folder, pencil, or highlighter. Much of the panic over these lost items stemmed from the trouble they would be in with their parents if they couldn't find it and their parents had to buy another. A lost piece of jewelry signified a significant loss, both financially and emotionally as these pieces were often received as gifts. Also, enough candy to share is a lot and was likely purchased specifically for the purpose of sharing. In addition to sharing their goods, I had the opportunity to see instances where students wanted to buy something for each other.

Soliciting Consumption for Friends

In a sudden and tragic set of circumstances, two of the eighth graders lost their mothers in the same month. The first was Alexander. His mother, a single parent of three children with no family support system in Tampa, was killed in a car accident. It happened in the middle of the night, and Alexander and his sisters were notified in the early morning. One of the first things he did was call the school. When I arrived before lunch, the entire school was in mourning. Not only was a parent dead, but Karen, Alexander's mother, was also one of the most dedicated parent volunteers in the school. All of the staff and students and most parents knew her.

As I entered the office, I knew immediately something was wrong. The volunteer coordinator filled me in with tears in her eyes. I met Karen briefly during a reception following graduation the previous year, but realized what she meant to the school. During lunch it was obvious that the eighth grade girls were crying as they came through the line. The younger boys' joking and pushing to get to the front of the line was gone. The

younger girls came through positively despondent. The eighth grade boys filed through the lunch line alone, held back until everyone else had left for the tables. They had not left the boys' classroom building all day. As they came in, their faces were puffy, their eyes downcast. They returned immediately to their homeroom to eat lunch. Their homeroom teacher told me the boys cried all day and could not concentrate on work. Later that afternoon, I learned four of the eighth grade boys' parents offered to take Alexander in after hearing of his loss.

After a whirlwind of emergency court appearances and negotiations among the head of school, other key school personnel, Alexander's father, and Alexander's sisters, Alexander went to live with his classmate Josias's family.⁵⁴ This process took no more than a couple of days. Immediately after Alexander's move, I ran into Ms. Curtis as she hauled in three bags full of clothes purchased at Wal-mart. Assuming the clothes were costumes for the upcoming play, I asked her about them. She informed me they were for Alexander. There were issues retrieving all of Alexander's belongings, including his school uniforms, from his house. Therefore, Ms. Curtis took on the responsibility of buying him the things he needed. Thinking she was paying for this out of pocket, I offered to help. She told me that the foundation (the funding mechanism for the school) was paying for everything. As our conversation continued, she said she was going to get Alexander one more thing he had asked for—an Xbox controller. Reading the surprise on my face, she laughed and explained. When she asked Alexander what he needed, he told her about the necessities and then asked quietly and with his head down if he could please have an Xbox controller. It turns out Alexander brought a Xbox gaming system to Josias's house and he wanted the controller so he and Josias could play the game together. Alexander's request for the second controller was profoundly social. He asked for it in order to share something that he had with someone else who was sharing so much (his home, his room, his mother) with him.

The second student, Kaia, lost her mother not two weeks after Alexander. Although obviously devastating for Kaia, this loss was made a bit easier by family

⁵⁴ Alexander's older sisters were 17 and 19 and the court declared the 17 year old could stay with her sister in their current home. The home had recently been built for them by Habitat for Humanity who were working to keep them in it even without Karen's income.

circumstances. Kaia was able to continue to live with her father and within a large, close-knit, and local extended family. She did not need someone to buy her clothes or find her a place live. However, this did not stop the eighth grade girls from wanting to express their care through consumption. The eighth grade girls brought in all the money they could and solicited heavily from the rest of the school to get flowers for Kaia's mother's funeral.

Through the work of soliciting consumption on the behalf of their classmates, Alexander and the eighth grade girls attempted to show how much they cared about their classmates through consumption. They wanted to consume to show love, camaraderie, and care for their friends. Some might say that given their financial circumstances, the tweens should buy only the essentials. However, refusing to judge is another way the tweens try to show care for friends.

Reserving Judgment

Another way that the tweens show care for one another in the realm of consumption is through a conscious reserving of judgment. Chapter 6 discussed the importance and tenets of "looking good." Looking good is created and maintained in consumer culture and requires a great deal of knowledge. It is a disidentification (Munoz, 1999) reaction to normalizing judgment and surveillance (Foucault, 1977). The tweens said they needed to look good in order to gain respect, both from themselves and from others. However, when faced with the opportunity to judge others for their lack of looking good, they refused. They refused to examine others and deem them delinquent, undisciplined bodies (Foucault, 1977) even as they self-discipline themselves to adhere to normalizing standards. A misunderstanding I had with Tahira is an example of this refusal to judge. One of the dress code rules at Scholastic Middle is that all shoes must be black. The fifth and sixth graders must have pure black shoes while the seventh and eighth graders must have primarily black shoes, but are permitted an accent color. When Tahira and I were discussing these rules, I mentioned that I had noticed Kabira (her best friend) wearing white Nikes. I said this to ask about why Tahira thought the faculty had not said anything to her, but before I could finish my question Tahira said defensively, "Those are her PE shoes."

I had not realized that the students could wear non-black shoes for PE, but what was more interesting is Tahira's defense of Kabira even though I had meant no harm. Weeks later Kabira had new, black, name-brand tennis shoes. I admired them and she said, "Yeah, I finally got them." Kabira had no other shoes to wear until her mom was able to buy her new ones. Tahira knew this and protected Kabira from what she saw as my normalizing judgment.

Brian suddenly clams up after talking for several minutes about the time he takes so his clothes match and his shoes look "fresh," when I ask him if he makes fun of other kids when they don't match. Suddenly quiet and self-conscious, he stumbles and pauses as he says, "No. . . . Not really . . . I might laugh but not to the point that . . . like with my friends. I will laugh and joke about it, but that's it." Brian backs off the level of importance he previously placed on looking good, and says, "It's their choice. They want to dress well, that's their choice. If they don't; that's up to them." These students do not refrain from teasing one another. However, they do avoid any teasing that they perceive as truly hurtful to an individual's ability to look good. Because looking good is so important to them, to bring this up would cross an implicit line of caring and inflict normalizing judgment.

Although every student I interviewed discussed the importance they placed on looking good, none would say anything negative about those who did not fit those standards. This refusal to judge is deeply ingrained within their identities, making me believe that it is at least partly about home training. In fact, in response to two fifth grade girls snidely commenting to a third girl jumping rope with them that, "Those shoes are the problem," and laughing. Seventh grade boy, Norrence, turned from where he was playing basketball with other boys and said, "Shoes ain't her problem, your weak skills is the problem." He accompanied this statement with a long and disgusted look at the fifth grade girls before turning back to his game. This was a moment of socialization for the two new fifth graders into the Scholastic Middle culture of care. These girls had not learned this care in their home training; therefore Norrence enforced this norm as a member of their peer culture. Alongside knowledge of the importance of looking good, they have learned the importance of understanding another's circumstances. They have

learned to see the world and choices as complicated in ways uncommon to their age group across class lines. This refusal to judge, combined with sharing, and soliciting goods for others were ways they showed care in their friendships. However, a lack of judgment also spread beyond their personal circles to strangers.

Care for Strangers

The tweens showed care not just for their families and friends, but also for strangers. With so much focus placed on looking good, I asked the tweens how they felt about people who did not look good. The tweens extended their refusal to judge to strangers. They would not submit these unknown bodies to the standards of the docile body. Two reasons not to judge others were a lack of knowledge regarding financial circumstances and a lack of knowledge regarding home training. They did not know the structural constraints on their agency, neither their access to structural resources like money or social resources from their habitus.

Unknown Financial Circumstances

I ask Jacynth what it means when people don't look good. As if I am judging these imaginary people just by asking, she immediately responds, "You never know what they have, any money or not. So you can't just say that quick at times." I ask what she would think about the parents of a kid who didn't look good, and she responds, "Probably can't afford that much stuff as other people could afford." Pushing the conversation further, I ask what she would think if she knew that the kid's parents had a comfortable amount of money to buy them nicer, more expensive clothes. She simply says, "Probably got bills to pay."

Jacynth, like others I interviewed, takes her own understandings of how family and parents operate in terms of values and priorities concerning money and places this frame on others. This attitude shows care for others, but it is also a form of self-care. Although Jacynth sees herself as having good parents who provide for her and teach her well, she is aware that there are times her parents might not be able to provide fully. Perhaps this is also a Golden Rule scenario, in that each of these tweens understands that they could be on the other side of this judgment at any time.

While Jacynth vehemently denies judging others, Brian is more philosophical. He says,

Me personally, I try not to do it, but sometimes I kind of do it. But I never really try to do it; because you don't know what that person has or if they can get things they want like me. Like if I have a friend or somebody I don't know and they come dressing looking dumb and stuff, I really wouldn't like laugh or nothing. I would just look at 'em. That's about it, cause you never know if they are fortunate enough to have the things you have. So you don't laugh at 'em.

In contrast to Jacynth, Brian's statement shows that he understands the constraints placed on his ability not to judge. He tries not to do it but is still caught within the structures and disciplines that discipline him and everyone else. He can't behave as a free agent as if those structural constraints do not exist, and thus he sometimes perpetuates them even though he does not want to. Brian admits that it is sometimes hard not to judge others, but makes it a point to try not to because he doesn't know how "fortunate" they are. It seems clear that part of this fortunate state is financial, however fortune can also be a matter of home training and knowledge about what how it is appropriate to look.

Unknown Home Training

"Their mom probably never told them," Kabira responds with a note of sadness in her voice. She quickly follows this statement with, "Or, they are just coming out just to get some air or something like that. They probably just going outside." Kabira is responding to the scenario of a hypothetical woman or girl wearing an outfit that is not "presentable" because it is too revealing and not modest enough according to Kabira's standards. In this scenario, the problem is not necessarily that she doesn't have enough money to dress well, but that she does not have the proper knowledge or habitus, to know how to dress appropriately. Kabira is trying to protect this hypothetical girl from normalizing judgment while trying to deter her own judgment. She is not interested in damning the other girl for not fitting her standards; rather she allows her a legitimate space to exist outside of them.

The tweens want to protect both these imaginary, hypothetical others and their hypothetical parents. When I ask Demarco what his mom buying things means about the

two of them, he says, “That she loves us [meaning him and his two brothers] and would take care of us right away.”

I follow his comment with, “So if you came looking raggedy what would that say?”

Demarco responds, “It would say hardly nothing. I’m still grateful for what I got.” Demarco sees love and care in what his mother buys him and his brothers, but if parents fail to buy things for their children this does not indicate a lack of love. In Demarco’s opinion all people, with or without home training, deserve respect and so others should reserve judgment.

In sum, the tweens showed care for many different categories of others through both their consumption and their understanding of the limits of consumption. They showed care for their families, particularly their mothers, by proving their home training out in the world by looking good. They also spent a significant portion of their money and a great deal of their time and energy in either buying or wanting to buy goods for their families. Another significant portion of their energies went to denying their desires for goods in various ways. They critically examined their family’s financial situation in order to determine the likelihood of receiving certain goods, downplayed their desires when the likelihood was low, and denied these desires by not sharing them much of the time. They also worked hard to graciously accept denial from their parents. In addition, the tweens showed care for their friends by sharing, soliciting consumption on their behalf, and reserving negative judgments. Finally, the tweens extended this refusal to judge to strangers, citing unknown financial circumstances and home training as legitimate reasons others (or potentially they) might not be able to live up to the same standards the tweens had set for themselves. Rather than being shallow, selfish, unthinking, or hedonistic consumers, the students of Scholastic Middle show a great deal of critical ability in their consumer decisions and reasoning regarding consumer culture.

Conclusion

The tweens I spoke to and observed care profoundly through their consumption. The control they enact as agents works against a system that seeks to place their consumption at the forefront of their identities. As agents, they utilized the rules and

resources of their home training to navigate the consumer system. These rules and resources were about caring as much as consuming. As members of the family team, they also engaged in many forms of self-denial to lessen the financial and emotional stress on their parents. Not only do they use their agency to adhere to more relational ways of defining themselves, but they also refuse to hold others to those stringent consumer standards that require expensive consumer display.

In many ways, these attitudes and actions are strategic. It is likely that they have been in situations where they didn't look as good as they would have liked due to a lack of money or knowledge and desired kind and fair judgment. Therefore, they desire to treat others kindly and judge them fairly when similar situations occur. However, their care is political. Through care, they attempt to undo the status quo power relations of class and race they see, and have been victim to, in society. And these are not the only political backlashes to which they are party. The next chapter discusses some of the more obvious consumer-based political tactics they use to enact resistance in school.

Chapter 8

Playing the rules: The politics of Consumption and Care

The Sock Revolution

The eighth grade girls are standing in what can best be described as a pseudo-line. Their conversational knots are roughly connected, with no one standing directly one in front of the other. This almost line offers them protection: it's a good enough line so as not to draw the attention of the school staff, but it still makes it easy to talk with one another.

I head down to the bottom of the stairs and see Chantoya at the front, half-standing on the first step leading to the building and half-bracing and lifting herself on the banister behind her. She, like the other girls, is facing away so she can speak to the classmate behind her. I immediately notice her thick, bright white tube socks. They are pulled up nearly to her knees.

"Nice socks," I say in the joking yet gentle tone I often find myself using when trying to engage the students. My tendency toward sarcasm isn't as well received here as with my own peers. At the same time, questions phrased more seriously are often taken as interrogations. I add in a smile and eyebrow lift to indicate that I'm more curious about the socks than making fun.

Chantoya lets a huge smile break across her face, lifts her chin a bit into the air, puts her hand on her hip, and laughs. She tips her left foot up onto the toes, bends her knee, and turns her lower body to the side so I can get an unobstructed view of the socks. "Like them?" she cheerily asks.

I laugh and say, "Sure," wondering where this is coming from. Normally the students, especially the girls, prefer "no show" socks. The dress code requires that ankles be covered, so this preference often earns the attention of school staff, who then require the students to wear white tube socks from the office. The tube socks conform to the

dress code, and further, punish offending students through embarrassment. Chantoya declares, “I’m going to wear them like this from now on.”

“Really?” I say with a bit of a smirk, figuring she’s having some fun with me.

“Yup, I like them. They’re comfortable, and I’m going to keep wearing them.”

For emphasis she bends down to make a quick tug at each sock to be sure they are at their maximum extension, hitting just below her kneecaps. As she finishes, Ms. Curtis arrives to collect the girls for drama class. The line becomes more recognizable as they file into the building.

Punishment to Pleasure

“Yup, I like them. They’re comfortable and I’m going to keep wearing them.”

This pronouncement turns a punishment into a pleasurable fashion performance. True to her word, when I saw Chantoya later in the week she was wearing tube socks pulled up as high as she could. I soon noticed that Kabira was wearing tube socks as well. In the next weeks, many of the younger girls were also wearing tube socks. Beginning with Chantoya, the students changed a fashion don’t—a punishment—into a preferred mode of dress—a pleasure. This act of creativity shows one of the ways in which the tweens at Scholastic Middle subvert institutionalized rules and create a quiet revolution through measured consumption.

The previous two chapters focused on the care shown for and by the tweens through consumption. This chapter focuses on how care as consumption can be understood as a subversive practice. After offering background on the school as a regulatory space, I will discuss two types of subversive behavior common at the school: code switching and playing with and without consumption. The limitations of these subversive acts will also be discussed. Finally, I will return to the subject of care, and discuss how it too is a subversive act against the dominant discourse surrounding these tweens.

School Discipline of the Poor, Minority, Tween Body

The tweens at Scholastic Middle consciously and unconsciously work to undo and repurpose the structures constraining and enabling various ways of being, both within their school and in their lives in general. Giddens’s (1986) structuration reveals that the

tweens are enabled and constrained by the various systems and structures in which they operate. The school itself is perhaps the most tangible structure and discourse which permeates their days. Although their actions are often unacknowledged or acknowledged through punishment by the school officials, the students nonetheless use their agency to affect the structure, fulfilling the process of structuration.

While Chantoya's rebellion, one enacted simply by changing her personal preferences regarding fashion, did not result in the administration changing the dress code, she did change the power of those rules and made a disciplined body (Foucault, 1977) somewhat less so. She turned a constraint of the school system into a resource (Giddens, 1986).

The dress code is one tactic of discipline (one constraint) that the students frequently push against. Scholastic Middle's uniforms consist of polo shirts with the school name and logo on the left breast and navy blue pants, shorts, or skirts (girls only). Pants must be made of twill or a similar material. The polo shirts are either green (for fifth, sixth, and seventh graders) or white (for eighth graders). All shirts must be worn fully tucked in. Students are allowed to wear navy blue jackets, sweatshirts, and sweaters.

Shorts and skirts must hit the knees but cannot be more than one to two inches below the knees. All clothing must also "fit appropriately," and not appear too tight or too loose. If a student's pants, shorts, or skirt has belt loops, a black belt must be worn. Students must wear black dress or athletic shoes. Jewelry, other than small studs or hoop earrings for girls, is prohibited. Students must wear white socks that cover their ankles; "no-show" socks are not permitted. Some of the rules, particularly the length and fit of pants and the use of belts, seem to be designed to discourage the relatively long-term trend among youth—particularly black male youth—of wearing large pants that sag below the waist and often show colorful boxer shorts. In addition, it is clear that a white, middle-class, adult norm regarding fashion and self-presentation is enforced. Craik (2007) says of school uniforms:

They prescribe the Do's of behaviour such as authority, order, hierarchy, role and rules, but equally uniforms proscribe the Don't's often more prominently

Hence uniform rules are imposed in response to what is deemed as unwelcome or

inappropriate behaviour, that is, uniforms are a composite of ‘not statements’ about the limits of acceptable performance in social context. (p. 37)

Scholastic Middle uniforms demonstrate adherence to this norm.

A docile student body, by definition in U.S. society is a white, middle-class body. According to Dolby (2002) these attempts at “white” dress move toward a standard of “non-ethnicity” rather than toward any definable style. Like the administrators at other black schools with white images⁵⁵ (see Dolby, 2002), the dress code at Scholastic Middle is more about what is *not* allowed, which is ethnic, than what it is, which is white. This style is defined as normal, rather than white (Perry, 2001). Looking good has a lot to do with reading both dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital (Carter, 2003), and being able to creatively engage the rules inherent in each. Uniforms attempt to limit this creativity.

However, uniforms go beyond visually creating a white, middle-class (i.e., docile) body. They are also used as tools to modify behavior. The white polo shirts are worn only by the eighth graders and are meant to serve as a symbol of leadership, accomplishment, and distinction. The variation in shirt color serves to visually rank individuals (Foucault, 1977). If teachers and administrators decide an eighth grader is not living up to the values and standards of the school, she is prohibited from wearing the white polo, and instead must wear a plain green t-shirt (having disgraced herself so much she can no longer wear even the green Scholastic Middle polo shirt). Once behavior improves, the white shirt is returned. This punishment and redemption cycle is practiced over a six-week examination period. These six weeks are a time when students must prove themselves reformed and must demonstrate their ability to behave appropriately as a docile body (Foucault, 1977). This is a period of exercise.

Of course, uniforms are not the only tools of regimentation utilized by the faculty and administrators of Scholastic Middle. Like any school, they break down time and space in discrete increments that determine the appropriate use of the body in each moment (i.e., doing history work in history class, eating during the lunch period, exercising in prescribed ways in gym class). Scholastic Middle utilizes the tools of

⁵⁵ The school is viewed as white by the tweens’ community peers. They are often accused of going to a “white school” despite its 100 percent minority student population.

hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination to create docile bodies according to white, middle-class norms (Foucault, 1977). Scholastic Middle disciplines through its standard curriculum, which is taught alongside middle-class, white, adult norms. Much of the communicative style—both verbal and nonverbal—of black and youth culture is deemed inappropriate at Scholastic Middle. The goals of a college-preparatory education (middle-class careers, financial stability, intellectual fulfillment, contribution to community) are presented in a middle-class, white vernacular and understanding. Students learn what is possible and how to go about obtaining it from a racial and class habitus not their own. A black vs. good dichotomy is created, which necessarily limits, but does not eradicate the power of their subversive practices. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus shows how the students' home training is a resource for negotiating school and consumer culture, but one that is insufficient when white, middle-class norms are the basis for proper behavior. However, as Gramsci (1971) explains, hegemony also offers the tools for subversion. The power system, entrenched and unseen and therefore difficult to challenge, can be made visible and understandable through discursive and practical knowledge (Giddens, 1986). The concept of disidentification offers another strategy to resist and subvert the status quo by utilizing and queering the norms of the dominant power structures (Munoz, 1999).

Given an understanding of societal control provided by Foucault's (1977) explanation of disciplinary society and Giddens (1986) structuration theory, it is clear that all U.S. citizens are subjected to various levels of consistent and powerful control through institutions including the social service system, the educational system, and the legal system among others. However, given their age, race, and economic status these tweens are subjected to higher levels of control and are less powerful, more closely identified, potentially delinquent (Foucault, 1977) members of society who reside in "problem" communities. When the added structures and control of such a strict school environment are added, individual choices are even more constrained. The extended day and mandatory weekend and summer structure at Scholastic Middle helps students catch up and work beyond their academic grade level while providing the social discipline deemed necessary for college attendance and professional careers. The elongated school

day, week, and year are also meant to keep the students “structured in time and space” and out of their neighborhoods and away from bad influences. Smaller school and class size and higher student-to-teacher ratios allows for increased learning opportunities and support as well as tighter control over student behavior. The next section explores the subversive practices of code switching and playing with and without consumption and discusses how they are enacted despite the severe restraints and regimentation of this disciplinary system.

Subversions

Control and constraint can provide opportunities for creativity in a consumer culture environment (Chin, 1993, 2001):

While close examination of the consumer environment of inner city children exposes tragic realities, the elements of play and self-affirmation exist there as well. Children and others are not simply challenged by the consumer environments they inhabit; they challenge them in important ways. (p. 104)

The tools the tweens use to subvert and resist the dominant power systems in school and their larger lives come from within that system of power. Foucault (1978) writes, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 95-96). For all the constraints imposed by the structure of power, it also provides resources that enable and are necessary for change (Gramsci, 1971). Although constrained in so many ways, the tweens of Scholastic Middle subvert the regimentation of the school and consumer structure through code switching.

Code Switching

Code switching is most commonly understood as an ability to shift among languages, dialects, or other linguistic means. Scotton and Ury (1977) define code switching as “the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction” (p. 7). Garner and Rubin (1986) refer to the phenomenon as style-shifting and view it as the “attitudinal posture that allows some Black English (BE) speakers to

become bidialectal without disavowing their blackness” (p. 33). Thus, code switching is also seen as a function of black identity:⁵⁶

The *codeswitching function* allows a person to temporarily accommodate to the norms and regulations of a group, organization, school, or workplace.

Codeswitching, or *fronting*, may occur when an organization or group shows signs of discomfort with explicit expressions of difference, especially race. In situations that foster codeswitching, African Americans act, think, dress, and express themselves in ways that maximize the comfort level of the person, group, or organization toward which the communication is focused. (Cross, Strauss & Fhagen-Smith, 1999, p. 32)

Cross, Strauss, and Fhagen-Smith (1999) specifically refer to Black individuals trying to create a level of comfort for other groups in their code switching. However, Chantoya shows this same concern for her peers’ comfort when she says,

I just talk where people can understand me. And that’s why, around my peers, I use more slang. ‘Cause that’s the understandable language. I’m not going to use a whole bunch of big words, throw ‘em at them, like stuff they’re not usually used to and try to make them act like me. I’m going to speak where it’s comfortable for them and me also talking to them.

Code switching is a complex process. In the specific instance of code switching from Black English (BE) to Standard English (SE), the situation is complicated by formal and informal standards of both BE and SE (Garner & Rubin, 1986). According to Burling (1973), the communication differences in BE and SE are seen in word variability, sound variability, contrast variability, and final consonants.

The students also switched between the informal and formal styles of both black English and standard English in conversations with me, often laughing at my lack of either practical or discursive knowledge regarding current slang. Frequently, I would

⁵⁶ Although much research has been done on code switching amongst Black people (see Carter, 2003; Doss & Gross, 1994; Koch, Gross, & Kolts, 2001), they are certainly not the only group that utilizes this tool. Code switching is a tool used by nearly all groups to address the communicative needs of various situations (Ball, Giles, & Hewstone, 1985; Street & Giles, 1982). People code switch across class, region, nationality, sex, gender, and sexuality as well.

enter conversations in progress where they would decode the language for me, saying things like “that means it looks good, Miss Edgecomb.” The younger boys particularly liked to take my language and make it their own. For example, I happened to use the word *accoutrement* in study hall, which two boys commented on and asked for the definition. A week later, the science teacher told me it had entered the fifth grade boys’ daily vocabulary.

Code switching requires an ability to switch among several speech codes based on the needs of the situation and audience. Code switching is a “strategic negotiation” (Carter, 2003) involving not only language but also other forms of cultural capital including speech patterns, conversation topic, dress, and body language. Carter expands the view of code switching, or “strategic negotiation,” from linguistic means to cultural capital and argues that Black youth must negotiate dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital, which encompass much more than language.

The term “dominant cultural capital” corresponds to Bourdieu’s conceptualization of powerful, high status cultural attributes, codes, and signals. . . . Similarly, “non-dominant cultural capital” embodies a set of tastes, or schemes of appreciation and understanding, accorded to a lower status group, that include preferences for particular linguistic, musical, or interactional styles. Non-dominant cultural capital describes those resources used by lower status individuals to gain “authentic” cultural status positions within their respective communities. Different, though interconnected, these two forms of capital represent variable cultural currencies, the benefits of which vary, depending upon the field in which the capital is used. (Carter, 2003, p. 138)

However, as an example from Chantoya demonstrates, code switching is not a universal skill. During Chantoya’s interview, I asked a question I often asked about how middle-class, middle-aged, white people might judge her at the mall if she were wearing what she considered to be a cute outfit. She responded with a story in which she believed Mr. Tejera, the head of school, was stereotyping someone without regard for varying tastes and cultural capital:

I'm going to use something, and this is what Mr. Tejera said. There was a car blasting some music, it was black, and it was on high wheels. He said, "I bet you that person has wasted his whole life doing the little things wrong."

To me that was like the biggest stereotype ever. And that really offended me. 'Cause you never know what that person went through. That person could have like a good life. I'm not saying blasting music is right. 'Cause a lot of people do it, and it's wrong. Who wants to hear your music? It's kind of rude. Actually, it's not wrong. It's just rude. So, I, and I guess we [meaning her classmates], were laughing at the music, cause we knew the song. We were like, "Oh, we like that song."

"Un uh, un uh, un uh," he [Mr. Tejera] was yelling.

I was like, "Is that really called for?" Because I think the thing a lot of people get in trouble for is they don't know how to deal with certain people. Your demeanor, or the way you approach other people, you can't approach with disrespect. It has to do with race in a sense, because we going to look at you and be like, here this white man⁵⁷ and he's trying to tell me that this is stupid, and we look at him, like he thinks he's better than us. Or if we do something our way, he'll get mad and just be like, "You're going to be like those people out there." And you can't approach us, or people in general, like that. Because it makes us look at you and not want to hear. We block it out, because you have to approach us with a calmer spirit. Because we're already like, "Hmm, why should we listen to this person?" Because, you don't really know who to trust really. So I think that was a kind of like a stereotype when he said that. They just like jazzing up their car. Maybe that's materialistic, but isn't a lot of people in the world, the media? A lot of them are materialistic. So, I thought that was a big stereotype. It was wrong to say it in front of a lot of people.

I mean, he could have been like, "That's kind of rude. Guys, that's something you wouldn't want to do." He could have said it in a different manner instead of saying what he said.

⁵⁷ Mr. Tejera is not white in the strict sense, but is Cuban-American. However, the majority of the students referred to him as white because of his light skin color.

In Chantoya's estimation, Mr. Tejera made a stereotypically raced assumption regarding the driver of the tricked-out car that made her shut out what he was trying to say. This is often the case in cross-cultural communication (Carter, 2003; Garner & Rubin, 1986). The non-dominant group refuses to accept standards, rules, and information regarding dominant cultural capital because of the perception that it is being given in a way that demeans them and their culture. Carter says, "students frequently refused to fully seek the acquisition of dominant cultural capital at school, especially during those moments when they perceived that school officials demeaned their own cultural resources" (p. 147). For Chantoya, Mr. Tejera's tone and comment lacked a "calm spirit" that would have allowed her to at the very least acknowledge to him that he had reached her and at the most altered her perceptions as to how and what a tricked out car communicates to others.

Of course, this assumes she needed the instruction in the first place. She makes it clear that she already understands how he views the car and finds it offensive that he cannot see the non-dominant cultural value it displays. Chantoya is code switching not simply amongst language but ideology in this instance. She understands that Mr. Tejera thinks the driver of the car is wrong. However, she refuses that estimation and tries to protect the driver from his judgment by pointing out that he does not know the driver's circumstances and is stereotyping. This can be seen as a strategy of disidentification (Munoz, 1999). From this interaction Chantoya concludes that Mr. Tejera cannot admit that he does not *know* much about the driver inside, and that he believes is in a position to judge the appropriateness of the driver's actions.⁵⁸

The example Chantoya provides regarding Mr. Tejera is an example of the ways the tweens go beyond linguistic code switching to subvert and find space in a system that demeans their knowledge and experiences. As a group, poor, minority, urban youth consistently upend and change fashion and language. However, more attention is paid to their interest in name brands than in their ability to take a \$2.50 tank top or t-shirt and turn it into a fashion staple. Similarly their use of vernacular black English is emphasized

⁵⁸ For Chantoya, Mr. Tejera is also missing another important aspect of her habitus, which is the knowledge that one should reserve judgment when they don't know another's circumstances.

rather than their interest in playing with language as a whole. These tweens do know about stereotypically black fashion and vernacular black English; however, they also know how to read situations and code-switch in their fashion, language, and demeanor. Much of this code switching is accomplished with a minimum amount of consumption and a minimum interest in consuming the way the system wants them to consume.

The initial story in this chapter shows eighth grader Chantoya taking the punishment of wearing long tube socks and turning it into a fashionable and pleasurable performance for herself and her peers. As I looked at her standing in line, her body was disciplined in time and space, and distributed according to rank. Her actions were prescribed. Hers is a seemingly docile body, and yet she used it to take up and use the rules to her advantage.

The influence of urban black youth on fashion, particularly youth fashion, is well documented (Gladwell, 2000; Kotlowitz, 1999, 2000). The “cool hunt” that continuously updates the fashion landscape most often takes place in urban settings and with minority children, tweens, and teens (Gladwell, 2000). The agency of these kids, tweens and teens enables fashion innovation. Structure offers up the resources of consumer culture and rules about how those resources are to be utilized. The tweens follow some rules but not others, which changes the system. The constant and overarching rule of the consumer system is not only buying but also constant change so that one must always be buying. Thus the innovators of consumer culture are bodies just as docile as those who do not make the fashion changes but rather follow them.

Scholastic Middle students are no exception to this attention to fashion and detail; however, in addition to financial constraints on fashion expression, students must wear uniforms while on campus. Scholastic Middle students know the dress code, and spend a great deal of time and creativity breaking or bending those rules. Girls often come to school wearing necklaces, large earrings, or rings. Most often they are told to take them off and either put them in their backpacks or turn them into the office to be picked up after school. Students, especially the girls, often wear sweaters and sweatshirts over their clothing. Although some wear either blue Scholastic Middle sweatshirts or plain blue sweatshirts, many do not. It is not uncommon to see students in embellished sweatshirts

of all kinds and colors. Sometimes they are asked to remove these sweatshirts before entering the main building, but most often they are overlooked. Faculty overlook these sweatshirts in an attempt to make the students more comfortable in sometimes heavily air-conditioned rooms and the students take advantage of this exception, relishing wearing clothing not sanctioned as part of the uniform.

Many of the boys take great pleasure in un-tucking their shirts. It is not uncommon for the same students to be told to tuck in their shirts upwards of five times a day. Given the number of times I have seen their shirts become un-tucked in a single afternoon, I find it hard to believe they are simply pulled out through ordinary movement. They are un-tucking them at nearly every opportunity. The dress code of Scholastic Middle is highly restrictive, even un-tucking one's shirt offers some small bit of relief from the rules and sense of individuality and rebelliousness.

As the students work to undo the dress code in these small ways (jewelry, sweaters and sweatshirts, un-tucking their shirts), the staff work to enforce these rules. Some code infractions cannot be resolved by asking the student to remove or alter her accessories or clothing. These punishments are doled out on a daily basis to more than one and generally less than five students per day. When students wear socks that do not cover their ankles, they receive long, thick tube socks from the office. Students who were forced to wear punishment socks did their best to disguise the length of the socks by folding them down. The socks showed that you had gotten into trouble, which was seen as a disgrace. Given conversations among the students, this disgrace stemmed from having been *caught* doing something wrong, rather than from having *done* something wrong.

At one point, two of the eighth grade girls, Dedra and Elois, were fighting because Elois said Dedra had gotten her into trouble over her socks. Although I never got a clear version of the incident, it seemed that Dedra had been called out for something and had attempted to turn the tables by asking why Elois wasn't in trouble for her socks. The resulting tiff between two otherwise very close friends went on for over a week, as Elois was mad about being told on as well as having to wear the long socks.

Given the importance that the students placed on not having to wear the long socks, Chantoya's decision to not only wear, but to embrace, the tube socks is an act of subversion. She and her friends have taken a rule formerly understood primarily as a constraint and firmly placed it in the category of a resource. They have conformed to the actions required of a docile body while subverting it. In the structure of school they have successfully, at least temporarily, subverted the system. This works for their fashion sensibility because in embracing the tube socks they have changed what is fashionable and left the administration to accept a style they do not like or change the rules.

When Chantoya is punished for her socks being too short—a positive characteristic according to her habitus and non-dominant cultural capital informed by being black, young, and from an urban neighborhood—she is being punished for not adhering to the dominant cultural capital of the administrators. However, in their punishment they actually go beyond their own taste preferences with the large tube socks to make a point—a point that backfires when Chantoya and her peers decide to incorporate the long socks into their system of taste. Chantoya and her peers are talking back to, rather than with, the dominant system. The recognition that cultural capital writ large plays a role in code switching is important in understanding how larger systems of taste and understanding inform cross-cultural interaction. There is a difference in acceptable dress style between the students and administration at Scholastic Middle that comes from a difference in taste, and in cultural capital. The dominant cultural capital of the administration is then used as a tool to discipline the students. However, through creativity and code switching, the tweens find ways to hold their bodies up to hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination and be declared a docile body all while subverting the structure and docile body (Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1986). They have successfully disidentified (Munoz, 1999). What was once primarily a constraint of the system is now primarily a resource (Giddens, 1986). Another way that the tweens challenge the system is by breaking the rules of the consumer system to play with it in new and creative ways and to play without it.

Playing With and Without Consumption

Beyond doing very well without name brand clothing, the students of Scholastic Middle often do without many other consumer goods. Toys and entertainment commodities are considered important for children and are one of the categories of goods that these tweens must often make strategic choices regarding or do without. These goods are not used in isolation but form the basis for play and interaction among children, tweens, teens, and adults. Given the importance of these aspects of consumer culture to peer interaction, the tweens at Scholastic Middle must engage consumer culture in creative ways within their financial constraints. In order to address the ways tweens subvert the packaged, “use as” directions regarding toys and play, I will first address academic work on play, then move on to examples of this play without consumer means.

Play in theory. Play is a child’s work (Montessori, 1964). It is therefore serious and important. As Barry (2008) says, “Playing and fun are not the same thing, though when we grow up we may forget that, and find ourselves mixing up playing with happiness. There can be a kind of amnesia about the seriousness of playing” (p. 51). For the students of Scholastic Middle, playing is serious and is a way to denote membership in their peer group. Pugh (2009) says knowledge of popular culture, if not the tools of that culture in the form of toys or other goods, is necessary for belonging and dignity among children (see also Chin, 2001).

Play is accomplished within designated limits of time and space, and creates order and structure (Huizinga, 1950, p. 7-12). Regarding the freedom of play, Huizinga (1950) says that play as a necessity of life does not detract from its disinterested character toward the everyday because:

The purposes it serves are external to immediate material interests or the individual satisfaction of biological needs. As a sacred activity play naturally contributes to the well being of the group, but in quite another way and by other means than the acquisition of the necessities of life. (p. 9)

Play must take place in a separate, liminal, contained setting outside of “normal” life (V. Turner, 1969, 1987, 2001; Huizinga, 1950). These students took one of the most disciplining structures in our society—a school—and carved out settings where they

challenged the power of the standard rules and rhythms and enacted their own. They played not just in the moments that the timetable and structure afforded them, like recess or lunch, but in areas and times marked as off-limits for this type of behavior. Within confines of time and space, the power of the structure was challenged and redefined through their agency. Because the body is partially disciplined through the structuring of time and space (Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1986; Munoz, 1999), altering our understandings of space is one move toward a less disciplined body.

Despite the necessity of play to culture and human nature (even animal nature), contemporary society often equates play—especially the play of children—with toys. The what and how of playing is complicated for those in this study by their statuses as both minorities and poor. Chin (1999) details the ways girls in Newhallville made their white dolls hair “black” and therefore a more accurate representation of themselves through braids and beads. Rather than demanding black dolls, they accomplished this through the creative use of the means at hand. The tweens I studied do the same. Although I never saw any of them play with dolls, I did witness a great deal of play. Three forms and instances deserve special note: rapping, lists, and magazines.

Entrainment and the alteration of time and space. Rapping is a favorite activity of the boys. It could take place anywhere at the spur of the moment and at anytime when they weren't being strictly controlled—in art class, on the playground, at lunch, in line for class, or on the bus on a school trip. Generally one student begins to rap, either in response to some internal impetus or as a result of conversation with others. Almost immediately the others make space for him, turning to him and moving away to give him room. They participate by keeping a beat, adding to, or rapping alongside others. Often their additions are a form of descant, an ornamental or counter melody that enhances rather than competes with the original. Very rarely does the original rapper maintain the floor; the activity quickly becomes one of taking turns being center stage. When this turn taking is not acknowledged by relinquishing the floor, arguments break out. The process is at once pleasurable and serious. Here, language is the raw material for play. However, as the boys rap they display a knowledge of this musical genre gained by listening to the

music. Since they often do not own many CDs, they gain this knowledge from television, radio, listening to others' CDs, or downloading pirated copies.

Rogers (1994) hits on rhythm as a means of organizing and performing organization. Calling on Foucault's (1977) concept of the docile body, he claims that the rhythms of a culture help discipline and create a docile body, and, just as some rhythms subjugate the citizen, others "subvert, resist, enact a different order" (p. 223). The boys' rapping was "a rhythm from a different rhythmic sensibility, a different form of order and social organization" from the one imposed by school. They used rapping as a chance to entrain themselves into a different rhythm and therefore body and mind space. The law of entrainment says that two rhythmic patterns in proximity will quickly lock up (Huygens as cited in Rogers, 1994).

The boys seemed to seek and find a sense of their own bodily rhythm in communal action rather than a rhythm and set of actions imposed on them by the larger structures of school and society. Similar to the concept of entrainment, the boys' play can also be understood as "jamming" in Eisenberg's (1990) sense of the term. Jamming offers "an ecstatic way of balancing autonomy and interdependence in organizing . . . [and] a different route . . . to community" (p. 139). It requires individuals of sufficient skill and cannot be planned.

On one occasion, I watched as a group of teachers gave up on calling an end to the session despite the fact that it was time to go inside for class. They let it play out of its own accord. This activity was removed from the timetable of the school day, even by the timekeepers themselves, and exemplifies how the students experienced it, as well, as set apart from the school day. The rap session created a liminal space (V. Turner, 1969, 1987, 2001). This too is a necessary basis for jamming; the setting must be separate from everyday life (Eisenberg, 1990, p. 155). In this and other characteristics, the requirements for jamming are much like the requirements for play—voluntary, disinterested, within designated limits of time and space, and creating order and structure (Huizinga, 1950).

For each of the boys involved, the created rhythm was improvised among a group of other boys like themselves. Although their created rhythm was influenced by popular R&B music, it did not discipline them or require them to be quiet, still and unobtrusive.

Their bodies worked collectively like the machine created by the disciplined society, but oriented instead toward play. Another form of play that shows aspects of entrainment and jamming is the list making of the eighth grade girls.

Our CD—our connection. Another spontaneous act of play was one that involved sharing preferences and creating lists. Often a group would playfully interact simply by taking down lists of their preferences as a group, their favorite names, or their favorite actors and actresses. One particular instance involved music.

During some down time in a class in the library, the eighth grade girls spontaneously came to the conclusion that they needed “their own” CD. It began, much like the boys’ rapping, with Tahira and Dedra having a casual conversation about what songs they liked. Then Elois got involved. Somehow the talk jumped tables to Cala, who responded enthusiastically with her song. From here it turned into a list. Tahira wrote down everyone’s names on a piece of notebook paper with space for them to put their favorite song. Each of the girls recorded their favorite song until the list came to Dedra, with whom the conversation had started. Dedra couldn’t decide on one song, so said she’d put two. This led everyone who had gone before to choose a second song. This impromptu activity, a playful and creative engagement with and altering of packaged consumer culture, became play in which each girl wanted to participate.

When the list got to Kaia, who hadn’t been paying attention, the girls explained the activity to her. At this point, the rules of the game had been formalized. Once the rules were explained, Kaia was ready to record her choices but was distressed to find they had already been picked. Her inability to come up with a song was detrimental to her status in the group and threatened the construction of play. The girls told Kaia, “Come on! You have to pick two songs.” The girls may have entrained the game into their own rhythm, but it was no less disciplined than any other imposed rhythm.

Kaia wracked her brain and came up with two songs, which drew cheers from her classmates. These cheers came because they loved her new choices, and also because she had fulfilled her role as group member.

The tweens’ play redefines the goods and the spaces in which they are living, learning, and playing through their own set of strict but spontaneous rules. Eisenberg

(1990) writes that a highly defined structure can be liberating (p. 153-154). These strict structures can provide chances for agency. In the game of listing songs for “their CD” the eighth grade girls created strict rules regarding the necessity of participation and that the songs must be “good” according to the tastes of the group. The “good” standard was met easily by the shared knowledge of the group. However, the game was almost broken by Kaia’s initial inability to come up with songs that were both good and not previously mentioned.

As far as I know, the girls never made this particular CD. However, the process of determining what would go on it was their play. The creation of the actual CD was superfluous to the process of devising it that allowed for bonding, fun, and the serious work of play. The girls subverted the control of marketers and record companies by refusing to purchase the songs or listen to them as packaged (i.e., as a group on the CD). They also took ownership of the songs by choosing them and arranging them for “their CD.” The work no longer belonged to the company or artist, and the work’s true value was only found in the creation of a moment of entrained play that evidenced the bonds between the girls. It was play that required no purchasing. However, another instance of girls playing at the school required slightly more participation in consumer culture. For this, one magazine was required.

Opinions and popular culture. A final example of the need to be together, to join in, and to play together with very limited means happened at lunch as I sat with a group of sixth grade girls. Ezola was looking at the tween magazine *BOP* with three other girls. There was no talk of brands, clothes, or other consumer items. Instead, the conversation consisted of Ezola holding court in the middle of the table with the magazine out in front of her lying open. Only she was allowed to touch the magazine or turn the pages while the others sat next to her or leaned in from behind. Ezola turned the page, everyone took in the pictures for a second, and then the group decided who was the cutest boy on the page and how he compared to the other wonderful specimens of teenage maleness with whom they were all familiar.

Similar to the rapping and CD creation scenes detailed earlier, it was important to all the girls to have their say in this activity. The rhythm they created dictated that each

girl actively offer her opinion in a timely manner and with conviction. The girls entrained into a repetitive flow of conversation—flip, opinions, responses, flip. Deference was given to Ezola, as it was her magazine, and this was accepted by all and didn't diminish anyone else's enjoyment of the process. This magazine play was ordered and serious. They were bonding over this artifact of seemingly superficial feminine tween culture in serious and deep ways. Like the girls in Chin's (1993,1999, 2001) study they went "off-label"⁵⁹ and did what they wanted rather than what they were supposed to do with the commodity.

Looking at and discussing the magazine was important to them as a group and to their overall status as girls in their larger cohort. To not know these things or to fail to show an interest in them would mean not having things in common with your classmates. Membership in their group is largely determined by knowledge of various aspects of consumer culture, a knowledge deep enough to render and defend an opinion (Chin, 2001; Pugh, 2009).⁶⁰ Not only were these teen heartthrobs' looks important, but the conversation also required knowledge of how they fit into the celebrity system. What was unimportant were the brands they might be hawking, owning their CDs or movies, or purchase (or discussion) of the products advertised in the magazine.

Ezola's magazine is the only example of any direct buying and toy/commodity use in play detailed here. However, far from the hopes of the magazine to both sell copies to every girl and have their ads utilized, these girls had a single copy and paid very little, if any, attention to the ads. In fact, this style of reading magazines was common among the girls, and this was not the only time I witnessed this type of interaction. Their knowledge of consumer culture offers the common structure and rules in Giddens (1986) and Eisenberg's (1990) senses of the terms while their creativity, perhaps partially brought on by financial limitations, allows for improvisation and fun.

⁵⁹ "Off-label" is a term used by those in the medical field to denote using a medication for a purpose that may be commonly known and done but for which the Food and Drug Administration has not given approval. The tweens use consumer culture similarly.

⁶⁰ Performed and perceived heterosexuality was also key to this play as the desirability of the boys for both their looks and perceived personalities was the main part of the conversation.

In moments of play, the tweens' minds and bodies are working outside of the dominant disciplining structure even as their bodies, and in many ways their behavior, remain within the structure. By creating this liminal space and altered rhythm in their play they subvert the rhythm of the timetable that serves capitalism through timed labor, and the timetable of the school in particular. They instead shift from the system that delineates their day's tasks by the clock to a system within their play that focuses on a task orientation (see Thompson as cited in Rogers, 1994, p. 226). This task-oriented play does not require the task at hand to be done in a particular time frame, simply to be completed in the way that seems most natural to them rather from within a "time is money" framework.

To create their own spaces within the system, they must have a practical knowledge of the systems governing their time and behavior and remain compliant, or mostly compliant, to observers. They must be able to disrupt spaces set around them by school without being so disruptive as to have their play stopped. Like with code switching, they must appear to be docile bodies even as they are not being docile according to the rules and norms of the school system. This practical knowledge of the structures that bind their uses of time and space is no less important than the discursive knowledge of consumer culture that allows them to fill their liminal, self-created spaces with play. Again, it is knowledge, itself a form of power, of consumption and popular culture, rather than ownership of consumer goods that allows for these interactions. These knowledges also help form a cultural capital used to create authentic in-group membership.

The three previous examples of Scholastic Middle students at play—rapping, making an imaginary CD, and reading a magazine, have several elements in common that make resistive and subversive moves against both the structures of school and larger dominant discourses including consumer culture. Throughout these scenarios the tweens are exhibiting knowledge and therefore power; creativity and ownership; and rule creation tempered with freedom and improvisation. Through all of this, the tweens actively work against the dominant structures of school and consumer culture and the creation of docile bodies. Across all of these political moments—code switching

linguistically and through fashion and playing without toys—consumer knowledge, creativity, and other knowledges of popular culture combine to allow for subversive and important bonding. Important to all of these activities are the ways that this jamming and entrainment, enabled by consumer knowledge and creativity, serve to partition off space and time in order to challenge the docility of the body. Also important is access to the non-dominant capital of the tweens. It is this non-dominant capital that signals belonging in the group. Unfortunately, neither authentic group membership nor creative use of agency as individuals and as a group is enough to topple the system.

Limitations of Subversion

The subversive work of the tweens of Scholastic Middle is enabled and constrained by the structures that surround them. Structures, including consumer culture, offer them both resources and restrictions in their identity and connection work. These enactments of subversion, for all their individual and group creativity, still come from the very system they challenge (Foucault, 1977; Giddens, 1986; Gramsci, 1971). The sources of the rules and constraints are not easily seen; therefore, this power acts fully, constantly, and invisibly which increases its domination. Two of the issues I saw limiting these tweens' subversions were the impermanence of their resistive strategies and an internalized sense of abnormality.

Storage of Change

To perpetuate the dominant form of power, a power with the immediate potential to maintain or change, one must have a relatively solid place of resistance, a place within the status quo. In order to marshal these resources, one must be able to store them. Giddens (1986) argues for the importance of having a distinct locale to control, and says, "Of essential importance to the engendering of power is the storage of authoritative resources" (p. 261). Giddens defines storage as "a medium of 'binding' time-space involving, on the level of action, the knowledgeable management of a projected future and recall of an elapsed past," (p. 261) and "involving the retention and control of information or knowledge whereby social relations are perpetuated across time-space" (1986, p. 261).

This solid place of resistance is something the tweens of Scholastic Middle do not have economically, socially, or politically in U.S. society or at school. Although no one is able to challenge discipline with impunity, to have no leverage (in terms of age, race, and class) is to be in an extremely marginalized position. To “make do” (de Certeau, 1984) with what the system offers by changing it is a constant of the consumer system and, as Bourdieu (1984) argues, the class and taste systems. In addition, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, itself a part of the system, creates a limiting effect on what types of “making do” will go on. Martens et al. (2004) say,

Attempting to overcome the classic structure agency antimony, habitus can be regarded as dynamic to the extent that it redefines itself according to new experiences as a structured structure. Yet, any change will not be dramatic, as the structuring principles tend to constrain any reorientation of habitus due to the internalized nature of dispositions. (p. 163)

Without the strategic advantage of institutionalized place to locate and refine autonomy, the tactics of the tweens exist in the moment (Abu-Lughod, 1990; de Certeau, 1984; Giddens, 1986). What goes on outside of this moment as a constant disciplining apparatus are notions of abnormality brought on by discourses of inequality based racism, sexism, and classism. Impermanent subversive strategies are not sufficient resources to overcome once and for all the constant defining of an individual as abnormal and the subsequent internalization of oppression. Of course, no one can do this in a disciplining society; therefore, this fact should not discount the importance and impressiveness of the work the tweens are doing.

Internalized Oppression

Through self-discipline brought about by the constant evaluation, examination, and normalization (Foucault, 1977) of the system, an internalized sense of stigmatized (Goffman, 1959, 1963) and delinquent (Foucault, 1977) identity still makes its way into the tweens’ consciousness. Many times while talking to the tweens at Scholastic Middle I was disheartened by the ways that they utilized a white as good and black as bad dichotomy. Even Elois, who was on the front lines of the sock revolution and one of the creators of the eighth grade girls CD game, articulates this difference.

When asked to describe what others would think about her at the mall, she says they might say she is a “wannabe white girl.” This is because of the class and modesty with which she dresses. Like the other girls at the school, Elois places a high value on modesty. Despite her and her peers obvious care in dressing modestly, Elois believes that other Black people⁶¹ equate modesty, and therefore goodness, with whiteness. Because she dresses modestly she does not dress as if she is a Black girl, but a white girl. When I ask her what a white girl would wear to be called a “wannabe Black girl,” she says, “tight Apple Bottoms⁶² jeans” or “a short skirt that’s like up to here,” signaling the upper quarter of her thigh, and “a lot of jewelry . . . gold bangles, big hoop earrings, and strap up shoes.” Elois and her peers do not fit this stereotype of blackness and yet she still holds it up in stereotypical ways.

Chantoya, limited by an understandable sense of ontological security provided by having others that share her cultural capital and habitus around her, decided not to go to a prominent private high school where she received a scholarship because she will be one of the very few girls of color there. I learn this as the result of a casual question asking if she has heard from any of the high school to which she applied. She says, “I got into St. Francis. Scholarship too.” As I’m getting ready to congratulate her on getting a scholarship to such a prestigious private school, she interrupts. “But, I’m not going.”

“Oh, where else did you get in?” She answers that she’s chosen a local magnet school, and her answer surprises me. Seeing my expression, she says, “I don’t want to go to St. Francis.” Eventually she says, “I don’t want to be the only Black girl. Vanessa goes there, and they don’t know nothing about her. It’s hard.” Vanessa graduated as valedictorian of last year’s class. She is warm and outgoing, a girl sure to make friends in any group. As Chantoya goes on to explain, it isn’t that the other girls at St. Francis are mean to Vanessa, the problem is that she has to explain everything about being black to

⁶¹ This conversation and others with other girls shows that they are referring to how they are seen by other Black people, rather than by white people. This is partly because they don’t think white people understand they have a particular style of dress.

⁶² Apple Bottoms was a controversial brand amongst the girls. Most hated the brand and thought it inappropriate for girls and women with good home training. The brand was begun by rap artist Nelly is marketed to women with “curves” and is considered popular in the black youth community. The jeans are generally quite tight with embellishment on the back pockets to draw attention to the butt.

them. Chantoya says that the girls are still asking Vanessa about how she changed her hair from braids to short, weeks after the style change. It is this pressure of being one of two Black girls in the school that makes her choose not to take this offer. These examples, by far not the only ones I witnessed, show the real social, economic, and political constraints of a disciplined society that these girls' brilliance and creativity cannot always overcome. They work hard to discipline themselves to be modest, smart, docile bodies according to both their own habitus and the dominant habitus, however both stereotypes and the fear of being the target of those (i.e., the only Black girl) are daunting roadblocks. Another aspect of their creativity subject to constraint is the care they put into their consumption for themselves and others.

Subversive Care

Showing care for themselves and others through consumer culture goes beyond having interpersonal salience to subverting larger structures and value systems. The care the tweens of Scholastic Middle show for themselves and others is a form of resistance. The various forms of care detailed earlier, such as receiving and proving home training, denying desire, performing as a team, sharing, and reserving judgment, can all be seen as challenging the hierarchy of the power system. Although the tweens and their families are bombarded by negative images of themselves, they continue to show care and respect for themselves and their families. They refuse to fully accept the abnormal, delinquent (Foucault, 1977), spoiled, and stigmatized (Goffman, 1959, 1963) identities that have been assigned to them by dominant culture. Instead, they rely on empathy, standards of non-judgment, and teamwork to provide symbolic and material comfort and care for themselves and others. They acknowledge and show respect for those who are minority and poor in a racist and classist culture. They refuse to examine and negatively rank or stereotypically categorize, even as they attempt to show themselves in a positive light to both non-dominant and dominant society by "looking good." They are refusing normalizing judgment (Foucault, 1977).

The simple and yet infinitely complex act of respecting themselves, their families, their friends, and strangers are acts against the status quo. They refuse to let their visibility to the dominant culture as potentially delinquent, non-docile bodies determine

how they care for each other and themselves. Through code switching linguistically, ideologically, and through fashion; playing with and without consumption; and showing respect and care, the tweens redeploy, revolutionize, and subvert the social, economic, and political constraints in ways that allow them to live in their delinquent identities, gain some sense of control, and have fun.

Conclusion

These tweens do incredible resistive work everyday and continue to try to chip away at the constraints of the structures that surround them. However, this resistance is enacted through the resources and performances of those same structures and is wielded by individuals with very little dominant cultural capital, making them resilient but not necessarily ground—or structure—breaking.

In this dissertation, I have explored how Scholastic Middle tweens care for self, receive care from others, care for others, and the ways in which they use care to subvert dominant narratives and manipulate consumer culture to their own ends. These creative manipulations may not be recognized or fully valued by dominant culture, but they nonetheless work to help the tweens with making do and getting through (de Certeau, 1984). The final chapter of this work will focus on what is potentially unique about the tweens at Scholastic Middle. Could Scholastic Middle be a unique environment that inspires creativity? If there is a difference, might the drama focus of the school create this effect? Finally, the chapter will question whether these creative subversive acts have the ability to alter their lives.

Chapter 9

So What?: A Closing Picture

Shopping Without Skills

I stand in the department store, staring. I stand and stare for a long time. A pretty, petite Latina sales associate asks me if I need help. “No, I’m just looking.”

“Let me know if you need anything. My name is Maria,” she replies with a smile. She walks back toward the sales desk, and I continue to stare. The suits taunt me on their organized round racks. Those put together with shirts and purses on the mannequins, their shoes lying on the plastic base, lead the chorus. “You don’t know what you’re doing! You’re going to look like a little girl playing dress up,” they trill in a singsong fashion. I start to respond; I’m not going to take that kind of rude commentary from a group of suits! I catch myself as my mouth curves to form the words “shut up,” because of course this is all in my head. I imagine that Maria, who had previously been so kind, would have to call security if I started shouting match with the suits.

I turn the word about to escape my mouth into a small yawn, brace myself as best I can, and step over the thin metal molding that separates the tile of the walkway from the carpet of the women’s suit section. “You can do this. It’s just trying on clothes. You can do this,” I repeat silently—partly trying to convince myself it is true and partly to block out the new chorus the suits are singing. They’ve begun to alternate their witty, “You don’t know what you’re doing!” with “You’ll never find something that fits right.” It takes effort, but I succeed in (mostly) drowning them out with my mantra and push the hangers apart on the first rack to get a better view of a gray skirt suit.

I haven’t felt like this much of a shopping fraud since I was a teenager. Having perfected my mall walk (equal parts boredom, hurry, and critical distance, with a dash of passion for the aesthetic) by 17, I’m generally unperturbed by shopping. However, in this moment I am a grown woman who has never bought a suit, and I am lost. Devon’s words in response to my question about why people shop for brands come back to me: “Because

they don't know which clothes to sort out. If they know they like a name brand, that makes it easier to shop." I look up from the gray suit I'm contemplating and see a Nine West sign above a rack a few yards away. Given the price range on the sign, I can see that these suits are at once more than I hoped to pay and not as expensive as some of the other brands. I sigh with relief and make a beeline for the familiar brand name.

Personal and Political Tween Knowledge

Despite our age, race, and class differences, in this shopping moment I am struggling with how to look good to garner positive attention and care from strangers, and, unlike the tweens I worked with, I am not astute enough to do it without the aid of name brands. I utilize this short cut to cover my own lack of knowledge and style in this situation.

I began this work with the question: How do poor, urban, minority youth, who are popularly constructed as the most hedonistic of consumers, create their identities through consumption? The students of Scholastic Middle have shown that their identities revolve around care, both the attainment and giving of that care. They care for themselves and acquire care from others by looking good and care for others through measured consumption and non-judgment. I have also learned that they work hard to "play the game" of white, middle-class culture while subverting it to avoid "selling out" (Urrieta, 2009).

First, far from tying their identities to the consumption of name brand apparel and accessories, the tweens focused their performances of self on "looking good." Looking good means grooming one's body and making sure that clothes are appropriate to the occasion. Clothes must also fit, match, and adhere to standards set by their home training. For girls, both femininity and modesty are important aspects of this home training. Following these tenets is a means to show and elicit care. Looking good demonstrates self-respect through the time and energy expended to look good and interact appropriately with others. It also shows care from parents and other caregivers through the enactment of home training provided by those who took the time to care for them. Finally, looking good elicits care from strangers, because tweens' performance as already

cared-for by themselves and their families shows others that they are good people and deserving recipients of care.

In addition to showing a cared-for identity, the students of Scholastic Middle also expend great effort through both consumption and consumer knowledge to take care of others—their families, friends, and strangers. They care for their families by buying for them when possible, but more often by policing their desires. They carefully avoid sharing their desires with parents to protect their parents' feelings. They also show care through sharing, soliciting consumption and care on the behalf of others, and reserving judgments about friends and unknown others. Rather than being simplistic and hypercritical in their assessments of others, the tweens largely refuse to judge strangers' consumption because they do not feel they have enough information regarding others' home training or financial circumstances to make assessments of their choices.

Although this dependence on and connection of care with consumption is itself a political act meant to claim and create worthwhile identities (and identities counter to popular images of hedonism), the tweens also go beyond these acts to subvert the structures of their school. Through creativity they subvert the rules of Scholastic Middle, engage in code switching, play with consumption in unprescribed ways and often play without it, and gain some measure of power around self-expression in their school. Although these subversions have limited lasting effect given the power inherent in the structure, they do have some effect and fulfill the process of structuration and work against discipline and the creation of the docile body (Foucault, 1977). Through an adherence to their non-dominant cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and some understanding of the dominant habitus (Carter, 2003) the tweens utilize various strategies such as impression management (Goffman, 1959) and disidentification (Munoz, 1999) to create worthy identities against the stereotypes and stigmas (Goffman, 1963) of the majority. These subversions are important to both agency and structure and create change, albeit measured and incremental change (Giddens, 1986).

In addition to trying to answer my research question, I thought that findings regarding poor, minority, urban, youth might have implications for other groups in U.S. consumer culture. It has certainly complicated the ways that I look at my own

consumption and how it factors into my identity. I realize I have lost something in becoming a member of the staged middle-class and gaining the cultural capital that comes with advanced education. I am no longer engaged in or privy to much of the “making do” work (de Certeau, 1984) that makes these tweens so creative and productive. Also, because of what I have learned from them, I am able to more easily recognize the identity and connection work I do through consumer culture. It also highlights the care work I could be doing and how I could do it with less material tools. I could and should be working to connect further with others through both the careful use of resources when I am trying to “look good” and techniques to consume less overall and making connecting with others a priority (over consuming for myself). This lesson is directly applicable to all those with resources in U.S. consumer culture. Taking the lessons of utilizing consumer culture primarily to show and give care would lead to less consumption for personal gain and have positive effects not only environmentally but also within families and other relationships. We might be able to spend less time working in order to consume and more time with others, both in our family and friend groups and working with others through community work (see Putnam, 2000).

There are many things I’ve learned from the tweens of Scholastic Middle that have not made it into this work. Some, as evidenced by the fact that I make new connections on at least a weekly basis, haven’t yet been recognized. However, one thing not yet discussed that belongs in this work is the potential connection between drama education and the kinds of self-awareness, and critical empathy and thinking I came to know through the students at Scholastic Middle.

Performing the Other to Know the Self

Among the fundamentals of English, history, science and math, Scholastic Middle offers students additional courses they believe essential for academic and social success. One of these courses is drama. While I was at Scholastic Middle every student attended drama class and had the opportunity to participate in several performance events, such as a fall production and spring showcase among other smaller events. Although their program is very much a “performance as demonstration,” and “body on display” use of performance rather than the “performance as methodology,” and “body as a medium for

learning” use of performance promoted by critical performance pedagogy (Pineau, 2009), it nonetheless offers the students a critical framework for their ideas of self and agency.

Whatever the approach, the students of Scholastic Middle learn to try on identities in their bodies through drama and become more aware of their bodies through gym, yoga, sports, dance, karate, and other physical activities. In many ways, learning to put on another persona makes one more aware of the performances they enact as themselves (see Schechner, 1985, 2002; Turner, 1987, 2001). Since we are consistently managing the impressions we make on others in order to perform our identities (Goffman, 1959), doing theatrical performance underscores the knowledge that these performances (both on and off stage) are to some extent ours to create and engage. Reflexivity, the key to enacting agency and change in the structure (Giddens, 1986), can be enhanced through any type of performance. When put in the hands of creative individuals who have an understanding of both non-dominant and dominant cultural capital, creating a reflexive performance of self becomes more than simply possible but probable.

Boal (1979) argues that the theater is a powerful weapon that has been taken from the masses and reserved for the elite. He says that the actor is able to transform while the spectator is passive. The key to revolution—the key to critical social conversation and change—is to help subordinate actors transform, rather than observe, their worlds. Although the students of Scholastic Middle have never heard of Boal or his view that theater provides a “rehearsal of revolution” (p. 141), they have gained some of this knowledge through the performances they have engaged. Brian is learning about both creating a positive image in the eyes of the white, middle-class and the limitations of these performances as he dresses his character, Byron, to confront the girlfriend’s mother. It is partially this focus on drama, these opportunities of becoming another, which allow the tweens to see themselves in different circumstances, give them the ability to code switch, and create the opportunity to critique and analyze dominant power structures that surround them both in school and the larger society. Perhaps even the most traditional types of performance offer some additional tools for both understanding and subverting the dominant structures. The understanding that one can become another in the time and space of the a play on stage may be enough for a group like poor, minority, urban tweens

(a group already versed to some extent in more than one habitus and cultural capital) to make connections to the opportunities for various identities off the stage. The benefits here are those of understanding how to make way in the dominant culture without paying the price of losing access to the non-dominant culture.

Benefits of Scholastic Middle

Drama education is one of the many tools that Scholastic Middle offers its students. I have attempted to write a critical ethnography. As such, Scholastic Middle's foundations, its administrators and faculty, and the rules they create and enforce have been heavily critiqued in this work. However, it would be unfair to leave my treatment of this school there. Without the administrators and faculty doing work in this community, these tweens would be educated in schools more concerned with test scores, control, and protocol than education. I believe in the mission and the people of Scholastic Middle, and their system has a great potential for moving these tweens into successful and productive lives.

Scholastic Middle is definitively a “whitestreaming” (Grande, 2000) institution. It uses the principles, biases, performances of self, moralities, values, and history of white, middle-class culture in its curriculum and disciplinary structure. The school also enacts whitestreaming in relatively unreflexive ways. Scholastic Middle could do more to help students understand their cultural differences from the “whitestream” as side-by-side differences rather than hierarchical difference through recognition of the *importance* of code switching and the reservation of normalizing judgment at which the students are so adept. However, Scholastic Middle teachers and administrators are also doing a job in which society as a whole seems uninterested, and they are successfully meeting their goals. Scholastic Middle is teaching tweens more adept code switching and reading and performing dominant cultural capital among other things (i.e., care). They are not directly teaching them to subvert it, but knowing it is the first step to doing so. They are serving their students, and they are serving them well.

Future Research

It is largely the tween's advanced empathic and critical thinking, a recognition of the performative nature of the self, and the relationship of consumer culture to their lives

that leads me to further research questions. First, only the students who did not feel cared for by their families placed a great deal of value on consumption and name brands. For those who felt their parents cared for them and gave them good home training, brands were superfluous to their core identities. If moving children, tweens, teens, and adults away from commodity-based identities is a productive and worthwhile goal, and I believe it is, and if care has an affect on this, how do we show more care for individuals? First, research with other groups such as the white, middle-class, the black, middle-class, and the white, lower classes is in order to see if this negative relationship between perceived care and brand affiliation persists. Second, research with different populations in different settings should be conducted to find out what leads to feelings of being cared for and prompts individuals to care for others. Finally, we must recognize that without hyperbole or exaggeration we are in a crisis. As the current economic crisis suggests, our consumer culture cannot be sustained without damage to the human relationships we hold dear and necessary. We cannot be committed to each other if we are committed to stuff.

Conclusion

It is an overstatement to say that these tweens hold the solution to our consumer crisis. I began this project with the goal of understanding and explaining why these tweens should not be demonized in media representations. I have found not only that they are not hedonistic and violent consumers, but also that these tweens provide concrete examples of what we can accomplish with a different view of consumer culture. They offer citizens of consumer culture many lessons to consider in order in placing our relationships as primary over our consumption.

Lynda Barry (2008) says, “experience is not explanation” (p. 99). I am a translator who has done the best I can to convey my experience with these tweens as they navigate school, family, and U.S. consumer culture. I live in U.S. consumer culture. As I conducted this research, I was 28-30 years old. The tweens were 10-14 years old. I am white. They are Black and Latina/o. I have managed, as many of us do, to minimize many of the most painful moments of my adolescence and childhood. These memories are also buffered by the fact that I have lived through and past them. These tweens who gave me their time are still working through these moments and events.

What I cannot offer in having lived these experiences is offered in my attempts to translate them. One reason I explore the intersections of consumer culture, adolescence and identity now is because I lived through it without being able to create explanations. I was and am unable to fully grasp what consumption meant to my own tween identity and how it affects my adult decisions. Here I try to translate toward an explanation and hope I have done the students of Scholastic Middle some justice in that translation.

Epilogue

Living up to Tween Expectations

“A message came back from the great beyond. There’s 57 channels and nothin’ on. 57 channels and nothin’ on. 57 channels and nothin’ on. So I bought a .44 . . .,” Bruce croons from the iPod station on the dresser. I understand how he feels. My own issues of excess not being enough have led me to break down and finally clean my closet. A semester packed with teaching, directing a performance, and writing this dissertation has left my closet in a chaotic state. Shoes in a pile on the floor, clothes thrown on shelves, and clothes that remain on hangers being in no order make the closet largely unusable and, judging by the bruise left by stepping on an upturned high heel, dangerous. With three trash bags full of clothes, shoes, and purses marked for the thrift store behind me, I stare at six pairs of black flats. “Hmm,” I think to myself, “I’ve been shopping for a pair of black loafers for two months because I was sure *needed* some.” I examine the shoes laid out before me and look at the dog sprawled amongst the bags of discarded clothes. “Interesting,” I say aloud. It seems he doesn’t agree, as he makes no more than the slightest effort to lift his chin from the carpet before giving up and laying it back down.

I know who would find it interesting—Jacynth. I imagine her standing at the door of the walk-in closet. She’s shaking her head, “Miss Edgecomb, this is a disgrace. Whatcha need all this for? You’ve wasted your money.”

I know she’s right. What happened? When I was her age, I had one pair of black shoes. I didn’t even layer my clothes because that seemed a waste. If I layered then I had to wear two shirts in one day, thus depleted the shirts to choose from for the rest of the week. Also, who had money to waste on shirts you couldn’t wear by themselves? (As I think about this, I try not to look at the newly reorganized *rack* of tank tops I layer under most everything.)

On the one hand, it seems impossible that I haven't gotten smarter in the last fifteen years. (What is all this schooling for?) However, looking at my closet from Jacynth's perspective—from the perspective of any of the tweens at Scholastic Middle—I can see I've lost something. I may not be less intelligent, but I am less creative. How many mornings do I stomp in and out of this closet holding no less than 200 items of clothing frustrated that I have nothing to wear? Growing up I had a closet with one rod less than four feet long and two drawers in the dresser I shared with my sisters—neither closet nor drawers were ever full. And I got dressed every day.

The truth is Jacynth's trip into my head, my closet, and my consumer life isn't the first. She gets here a lot, so do her peers. Taite questions my matching skills when I want to wear a patterned scarf and patterned sweater together. Kabira had serious reservations about the short dress I wore to a party a couple weekends ago. Latoya thoroughly disapproves of my habit of ironing only the fronts of my shirts when I'm in a hurry, and Tahira chastised me just yesterday for not putting enough thought into my mom's Christmas present.

The tweens never doubted how interesting they were to me or that they had important things to say. They were and are confident in their abilities and knowledge. What I don't think they know and what is continually reinforced to me is just how profound their abilities to negotiate consumer culture with creativity and care are. I sit in my overstuffed, oversized closet no less interested in looking good than they are but without the skills they possess.

I also realize that my consumption is by no means as caring as theirs. I may not be selfish, but I do not consider care in my everyday, repeated consumer processes. I make do when I *need* to, not *because* I can. I am working to live up to their standards, and I wonder how they will continue to uphold those same standards as their lives change. If they strike that balance between good luck and hard work and make it into the middle-class, will they be able to hold onto their own standards of creativity and care? They have built and nurtured creativity and care thus far in ways vastly superior to my own attempts at their age. Also, they do this in a culture more committed to consumerism than the one I

grew up in. Therefore, I have hope that they will continue to, as Devon puts it, “Keep it real and not be suckas.”

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

What brands do you like best? Why are these brands interesting to you?

Do you think that what people wear is important? Why?

Do you think that other people get a good idea of who you are from what you wear?

What is your favorite way to spend free time? What is particularly satisfying about spending your time doing that?

Do you like to shop with friends? With family? Why?

What is the best thing about shopping? What is the worst thing about shopping?

What do you do if you can't buy something you want?

What is your favorite thing? Why is this your favorite thing?

If I gave you \$20 today what would you do with it?

In what ways does buying things allow for connection between you and your peers?

Do you think you're better liked when you have things that are popular in your peer group?

What are the similarities across all kids?

Do you think that kids bond over what they don't have or can't afford? Do they do this more or less than when they get together over things they do have and can afford?

Is there an important difference between having something and being able to afford it?

Is buying you things seen as a financial stress on your family? If so, is the stress that buying something places on you or your family ever discussed?

What is the most important thing to you about your friends?

Do you have a best friend? If so, why are they your best friend? If the two of you could go anywhere, where would you go? Why?

If you can't afford something you want, does it upset you? What do you do about it?

Do you think you could be happy if you didn't have anything cool? Maybe, no brand name clothes? Why or why not?

Are nice clothes important to you? What is an example of a nice outfit? How important is it to dress nice?

Do you have your own bedroom? What is your bedroom like?

Do you have your own closet? What is your closet like? Is it important to have a closet?

Do you think people can tell who you are by what you look like? What impressions do you think they have that are correct? Incorrect?

What is consumption? What is consumer culture?

Who are you?

Why do you buy things?

What kinds of things do you buy?

What do you want to have a say in that you buy or your parent's buy for you?

What kinds of things are unimportant for you to have a say in?

Why do other people buy things?

Do you usually get things when you want them? If not, why do you have to wait? How do you feel about that?

What is the last thing that you bought with your own money?

What's the last thing your parent's bought for you?

Is there anything in particular that you like to spend your own money on?

Do your parents have any rules about the kinds of things you can buy? Are these rules different than the rules they have for what they will buy you? Do these rules seem fair?

Do you like wearing uniforms at school? Why or why not?

Do you have a favorite brand? Are brands important to you? To other people?

What is your favorite outfit? Why? How do you feel when you wear it?

What would you wear to the mall?

Are there some kinds of clothes where brands are important and others that aren't?

Is there a brand or a place to buy clothes that would get you made fun of? Why?

If you were doing this research, what questions would you ask?