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The Corporatized Child

Allen D. Kanner, Ph.D.

Corporate capitalism — the form of capitalism that has prevailed in the United States and is spreading worldwide — has an undeniable impact on the psychological well-being of everyone who comes under its influence. Yet, this powerful institution is strangely invisible in our psychological theories, research, and practice. It is as if it exists as a neutral backdrop to American life rather than playing a major role in determining people's values, identity, goals and behavior. Perhaps this is the case because the psychological assumptions, processes, and consequences of economic systems are considered beyond the scope of psychology proper. Our profession seems to fear the political ramifications of seriously examining — and criticizing — the psychological impact of the nation's economic system.

In this article, I wish to begin a conversation among my colleagues about corporate capitalism using the commercialization of childhood as a starting point. In the process, I hope to clarify why we cannot effectively counter the undesirable impact of marketing to children without addressing the corporate system that drives it.

Some recent history is useful in understanding the commercialization of childhood. During the mid-1980s, experts such as consumer psychologist, James McNeal, convinced advertisers that children had more money and more influence on their parents' spending than advertisers previously thought. Shortly thereafter and in response to industry lobbying, Congress passed several laws that rendered marketing to children far easier than before. This legislation permitted the advertising industry to launch a marketing invasion of childhood, and budgets for advertising to children rose from \$100 million in 1983 to \$16 billion in 2004. The invasion was successful. For example, in 2004, children aged four to twelve directly influenced \$330 billion of adult purchasing and "evoked" (e.g.,

unsolicited presents from grandparents) another \$340 billion. Children's influence on adult spending is growing at an estimated 20% per year.

The explosion in marketing is not simply quantitative. "Ad creep" is so extensive that children cannot participate in public life without being targeted, for example, at sports events, rock concerts, circuses, on public transportation, or at school. Children are also subjected to marketing barrages through every type of media and now spend more time interacting with the media than with their parents.

The following are some, but hardly exhaustive, recent developments in marketing to children that demonstrate what is happening:

In the last couple of years, movies intended for young audiences, such as Disney's "The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe," are being funded by dozens of sponsors per movie. Beyond mere product placements, sponsors are now involved in developing plots and writing dialogue to insure that their products are meaningfully interwoven into the fabric of films. The same heavy sponsor involvement is appearing in the production of television shows.

New products are often licensed before they are introduced, which means, for example, that a movie character is also made into a toy (perhaps available at a fast food restaurant), a video game, a board game, a clothing line, a book, etc. Profits from licensing can easily outstrip those made from the original film.

Children are being targeted at younger and younger ages, while marketing to parents of infants and toddlers is on the rise. Thus, researchers have documented that as soon as children are able to speak, they are requesting products. One large study of two to five year olds found that when asked about twelve corporate logos, some of which were for products intended for adults, most two year olds could identify at least eight, and frequently all twelve, logos. The Cartoon Network just launched a block of programs (ten hours a

week), called “Tickle U,” intended to teach pre-schoolers to have a sense of humor which, so the marketing suggests, will help them develop socially and cognitively. Finally, in response to advertising aimed at their parents, 27% of infants now own Baby Einstein, even though we have no evidence that the educational DVD improves later academic performance.

Another recent development is called “buzz” (also “viral” and “stealth”) marketing which occurs in a natural setting and is not supposed to be identifiable as advertising. One example is a company called the Girls Intelligence Agency (GIA) which has 40,000 “agents,” girls six to fourteen, who are on tap to generate buzz for the products of GIA’s clients. The girls are encouraged to throw slumber parties at which they pass out free products, take clandestine notes on their friends’ reactions, and don’t reveal that the party is sponsored. Proctor & Gamble boasts 250,000 teens — identified by P & G’s market research as leaders — at the corporation’s disposal to generate buzz for its large line of products.

What is the result of all this advertising? We don’t know the full story yet, but marketing to children has been implicated in childhood obesity and child-onset diabetes, violent behavior, cigarette and alcohol consumption, pressure on pre-teens to dress and act sexually, a narrowing of creative play in young children, and the adoption of materialistic values. Materialistic values, in turn, have been causally linked to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychosomatic symptoms in children.

This materialistic message underlying marketing is worth special attention for it goes beyond selling undesirable products, such as junk food and violent media, to the formation of children’s values and worldview. The consumer ideal — that happiness comes from the accumulation of money and material goods — is a subtext in all advertising, irrespective of the product or service being sold. Even ads for beneficial products contribute to the materialistic theme.

Modern marketing, however, does not merely inculcate materialistic values. Rather, it promotes what I call corporate materialism, which is the idea that happiness comes specifically from corporate products and, by extension, from corporations themselves. Marketing departments work hard to create corporate images that transcend any product a corporation may produce. They want children to identify with their corporate image, a marketing technique called “branding.”

To the extent that branding is successful, children come to identify themselves with specific corporations and, more generally, with the corporate system itself. Over time, they come to believe, consciously or unconsciously, that they are dependent on corporations and their products for a satisfying and meaningful life. They become the corporatized child.

Why are corporations willing to invade childhood on such a profound level, perverting children’s values and identities and aggressively selling them a huge array of harmful products? The commercialization of childhood is a natural extension of corporate capitalism, which is an economic system devoted to the commercialization and commodification of every aspect of life. Childhood is simply one of many precious seasons of life exploited by this economic system.

These disturbing facts bring me back to the need for psychology to examine critically the psychological dimensions of corporate capitalism. We cannot effectively grapple with the undesirable consequences of marketing to children without ultimately having to face the economic system of which they are symptoms.

For example, important for psychologists to know is that, according to law, corporations must put shareholder profit above all else, including social concerns. CEOs can, and are, fired if they publicly admit that their corporation is causing harm, such as contributing to childhood obesity by heavily promoting junk food. As psychologists, we certainly can speak out regarding the deleterious effects this marketing has, not only on children, but on corporate employees who are under tremendous pressure to rationalize unethical behavior in order to keep their jobs or get ahead.

Much of the power and privilege corporations now enjoy initially came from a bizarre 1890s ruling that gave corporations the status of legal persons. Attempts to curtail marketing to children are often countered by corporations claiming they are simply legal persons exercising their First Amendment rights to free speech. As psychologists, we can call for the repeal of this unjust ruling on the basis of the harm its doing to children and adults in the same way we would have called for the repeal of Jim Crow laws based on the harm they were doing to people of color.

A taboo against criticizing corporate capitalism is pervasive in our society and in our field. Psychology has broken such taboos before when it recognized the detrimental influence of sexism, homophobia, racism, and other oppressive social institutions on society and on the theory and practice of psychology. Given the serious harm perpetuated today on children and adults by America’s economic system, the time has come to break another taboo and to challenge corporate capitalism.

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Allen D. Kanner, Ph.D., is a Berkeley child, family and adult psychologist. He teaches at the Wright Institute, is co-editor of Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World, and a founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (www.commercialfreechildhood.org)

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