The Role of Symbolic Consumption in Identity Projects: The Case of Fostered Children

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumption impacts identity projects especially when it facilitates, accelerates, ameliorates or impedes identities in transition. Earlier studies have largely examined identity transitions within the context of privileged groups of consumers, to the relative neglect of less privileged consumer groups. Negative experiences such as stigmatization can impede identity transitions by interrupting the acquisition not just of an adult identity, but also of some of the essential consumer skills for operating in the marketplace, thus threatening self-esteem. The empirical context represented by less privileged groups such as fostered children, for instance, could offer significant additional theoretical insights into the impact of consumption experiences on identity projects. The literatures on transition and emerging adulthood informed our examination of the lived experiences of young fostered people.

Young people in the transition to adulthood in post-industrial societies have the opportunity to explore a wider range of potential identities because the current cultural environment is less normatively structured (Bauman 2001; Cote 2002). While this brings opportunities for self development, the task of configuring a coherent identity that will provide the basis for adult roles in work, family and home life, often creates a psychological burden (Schwartz et al. 2005). Evidence suggests that a sense of agency and the ability to exercise free choice are crucial to successfully undertaking future adult roles such as parenthood, employment and marriage (Schwartz 2004); and yet the ability to exercise agency and free choice are not necessarily enjoyed by all sections of society, often reflecting structural inequalities in the marketplace. During their transitions to young adulthood, fostered children often face the additional burden of managing social stigma and stereotyping in their identity projects because "at its core, the experience of stigma is fundamentally a threat to the self" (Crocker and Garcia 2006: 289).

We used a range of contacts (e.g. charities that support fostered young people; a lobbying organisation run by care-experienced young people; and support workers) to recruit sixteen young adults for group and individual interviews over an eight month period. All participants were aged between 16 and 21; and had either left care to live independently or were preparing to do so. A token incentive was paid to each participant. Focus group discussions with nine participants lasted between sixty and ninety minutes; and were held in single-sex groups (four men and five women). Nine individual interviews were held (7 women and 2 men). Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Open-ended questions were used to elicit the experiences of young fostered adults, and about how the fostered children had coped with those experiences in the transition to adulthood. Intratextual and intertextual interpretive analyses (Adkins and Ozanne 2005) were used, moving between deductive and inductive approaches. The interview framework was used for deductive analysis around themes such as experiences of leaving care. Inductive analysis was used to identify emergent themes (e.g. different views of the self; vulnerability; and coping strategies).

These fostered children's experiences showed how consumption was used to achieve selfhood and personal identity (Hirschman and Hill 2000); the role of the material in identity formation processes; and particularly the creation of meaning via consumption including symbolic consumption and the extended self (Belk 1988). For the purposes of this paper, we follow Thompson (2005) and focus on three participants' stories (Veronica, Theresa, Krista) to illustrate the major themes which emerged from our overall data set about symbolic consumption in relation to transitional objects; precious possessions and relationships; and identity threats from stereotyping (that is, the fear that one's behavior will confirm an existing stereotype of a group with which one identifies).

At times of transition, possessions play an important role, symbolising relationships and helping to enhance feelings of psychological well-being during liminality (Noble and Walker, 1997). Our informants tended to have few material goods but these were very important to their psychological well-being, reinforcing the importance of transitional objects as identity markers. Krista's desk was a transitional, almost epiphanic (Woodward 2001) object, that had moved with Krista from her care home into her new flat, marking also her transition to adult status by living independently, and managing her household expenses via careful budgeting (e.g. the desk demonstrated her ability to save and to allocate resources carefully). This suggests scope for seeing the extended self (Belk 1988) in a much more nuanced way within the context of individuals' earlier consumption and attachment histories. In the context of the vulnerable youth coming out of foster care, the role of possessions is particularly important, confirming the role of symbolic consumption in transitions (Gentry et al. 1995; McAlexander 1991; Price et al. 2000; Roster 2001; Schouten 1991; Young 1991). Our research also builds on Hirschman and Hill's (2000) work on the role of possessions and the impact of restricted consumption on identity; and resonates too with recent work on refugees (Parkin 1999) who share characteristics in terms of the uncertainty of life, the transitoriness of possessions, and the brittleness of relationships.

Their children were sacred possessions, representing very important attachment objects for the fostered young women who themselves had experienced very poor histories of attachment in their own young lives. Veronica's story about the birthday party she had held for her daughter Megan illustrated how symbolic consumption was used to mark her precious daughter's birthday, and inscribe familial relationships. Veronica could thereby demonstrate that she had the means to be an indulgent, as well as caring, mother, and thus pass one of the key tests of adult identity (i.e. parenthood, George 1993).

Symbolic consumption emerged as a response when an identity threat was perceived from stereotyping, even when a young person's foster care status was concealed. For Theresa it was very important to be able to 'pass as normal' and to be accepted as a mother. She felt her physical appearance was instrumental in allowing her to disconnect from an earlier negative identity that might be attributed to her; and her physical appearance was closely tied to her self-esteem. Theresa fought hard to conceal aspects of her past that directly related to her being fostered (particularly the

people who had constituted her social network when she was fostered). Her appearance served to 'disguise' her from past social ties; she had changed her hair colour and had facial piercings to avoid being recognized by former friends. She was particularly anxious to protect her child and her partner from her past. This earlier youthful (negative) identity was in tension with the adult (positive) identity that she was trying so hard to move towards, particularly that of a caring mother who could be a good role model for her child.

Stories from fostered children show how they employ symbolic consumption in their strategies to resist and counteract the threats from their earlier negative identities as 'fostered children' as they forge new identities as young emergent adults and consumers. From their stories we see how they employ contingencies of self-worth in order firstly, to enhance their self-esteem in the key transitions to establishing an adult identity (becoming parents and establishing family life); and secondly to counter feelings of low self-esteem which contribute significantly to consumer marginality, vulnerability and disadvantage.

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