Children’s Peer Cultures and Interpretive Reproduction

Examining Peer Culture From Children’s Perspective

As we discussed in Chapter 1, a major change in children’s lives is their move outside the family. As we have seen, the timing and nature of children’s movement from the family into a society of peers varies over time and across cultures. In discussing these issues, I am using the term peers specifically to refer to that cohort or group of children who spend time together on an everyday basis. My focus is on local peer cultures that are produced and shared primarily through face-to-face interaction. (Of course, such local cultures are part of more general groups of children, which can be defined in terms of age or geographical boundaries—for example, all 3- to 6-year-olds in the United States.) Children produce a series of local peer cultures that become part of, and contribute to, the wider cultures of other children and adults within which they are embedded. These processes vary over time and across cultures, and the documentation and understanding of these variations should be a central topic in the new sociology of childhood.

Much of the traditional work on peer culture has focused on the outcomes (positive and negative) of experiences with peers on individual development. Most of this work has a functionalist view of culture; that is, culture is viewed as consisting of internalized shared values and norms that guide behavior. In line with the notion of interpretive reproduction,
we need to break away from this traditional view of peer culture. First, although the study of individual development (or how the child becomes an adult) is important, children and their peer cultures are worthy of documentation and study in their own right. In simple terms, kids are deserving of study as kids. Second, children’s culture is not something kids carry around in their heads to guide their behavior. Peer culture is public, collective, and performative (Geertz, 1973; Goffman, 1974). Therefore, in line with our interpretive approach, I define children’s peer culture as a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers (Corsaro, 2003; Corsaro & Eder, 1990).

In this chapter, we’ll discuss the importance of peer cultures for interpretive reproduction. We’ll begin by considering how children’s peer cultures fit into the general model of interpretive reproduction. We’ll then go on to discuss the importance of children’s experiences in their families to their transitions into initial peer cultures. Finally, we’ll consider symbolic and material aspects of children’s cultures.

Central Importance of Peer Culture in Interpretive Reproduction

In Chapters 1 and 2, we noted that from the perspective of interpretive reproduction, the focus is on children’s place and participation in cultural production and reproduction rather than on children’s private internalization of adult skills and knowledge. Central to this view is children’s participation in cultural routines. Routines, rather than individuals, are analyzed. It is through collective production of and participation in routines that children’s evolving memberships in both their peer cultures and the adult world are situated. Children’s participation in adult-child routines often generates disturbances or uncertainties in their lives. Such disturbances (including confusion, ambiguities, fears, and conflicts) are a natural outcome of adult-child interaction, given the power of adults and the cognitive and emotional immaturity of children. Although children play an active role in the production of cultural routines with adults, they most often occupy subordinate positions and are exposed to much more cultural information than they can process and understand. Surely, many confusions, fears, and uncertainties are addressed as they arise in adult-child interaction. However, it is an important assumption
of the interpretive approach that key features of peer cultures arise and develop as a result of children’s attempts to make sense of, and to a certain extent to resist, the adult world.

From the perspective of interpretive reproduction, children’s activities with peers and their collective production of a series of peer cultures are just as important as their interaction with adults. Furthermore, certain elements of peer culture also affect adult-child routines in the family and other cultural settings. We see, then, that children’s participation in adult-child routines in the family and other settings and their participation in the routines of peer cultures both influence their evolving membership in their children’s culture and in the adult world.

Parental Versus Peer Effects on Children’s Development

Recently, research on parental effects on children’s development has come under attack for its mixed and generally weak findings of parental influence, its failure to take genetic effects into account, and its underestimation of the influence of peers (Gladwell, 1998; Harris, 1998). Judith Harris, in her book *The Nurture Assumption*, reviewed research on parental effects on children’s personality and was especially critical of the failure of this research to take genetic effects into account. For example, she pointed to work in behavioral genetics, which claims that about 50% of personality outcomes can be linked to genetic factors and the remaining 50% to the environment. The surprising finding from this work is that when behavior geneticists went on to study the effects of shared (in the family) and nonshared environments (outside the family), they consistently found that growing up in the same home and being reared by the same parents had little or no effect on adult personalities of siblings (Harris, 1998; Plomin & Daniels, 1987); nor did birth order have any significant effects (Dunn & Plomin, 1990; Harris, 1998; also see work by sociologists such as Freese, Powell, & Steelman, 1999).

Given the findings from behavioral genetics, anthropology, and sociology on the importance of peer group interaction for children’s development, Harris claimed that peers are more important than parents in regard to children’s developmental outcomes. She did, however, qualify that parents have an important effect on their children’s behavior within the family. Overall, Harris’s argument and her group socialization theory, most especially its emphasis on the importance of social context, is quite similar to the theory of interpretive reproduction that we discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.
Children’s Transition to Initial Peer Cultures

Although, like Harris, I believe peers and peer culture are central to children’s evolving membership in their culture, this does not mean that parents and families are not important. Families play a key role in the development of peer culture in interpretive reproduction. Young children do not individually experience input from the adult world; rather, they participate in cultural routines in which information is first mediated by adults. In children’s early years, most of these adult-child cultural routines take place in families. Thus, initial peer cultures do not arise from children’s direct confrontations of the adult world. As children venture out from the family, they are aimed in specific directions, are prepared for interaction with distinct interpersonal and emotional orientations, and are armed with particular cultural resources that are all derived from earlier experiences in their families. Let’s take a look at some of these family influences.

Family Influences on Children’s Entry Into Initial Peer Cultures

Decisions about children’s initial interactions with peers, including the nature of these interactions, are first made within families. Parents normally decide when children first move outside families and what types of peer settings and institutions their children will enter (for example, neighborhood playgroups, day care centers, or early education programs). The nature and timing of these decisions relate to cultural conditions, values, and practices; they vary across cultures and within cultures over time. We saw in Chapter 5, for example, that in many non-Western societies, children move as toddlers into multiage peer care groups or are cared for primarily by older siblings. As we saw in our discussion of Nasaw’s (1985) Children of the City in Chapter 4, young sibling care by “little mothers” was the norm among the working class of major cities in turn-of-the-20th-century America. Sibling care probably was still common in the United States, especially in lower- and working-class families, at least into the 1950s, and it still exists today (Cicirelli, 1995; Y. Lee, Schneider, & Waite, 2003).

Beginning in the 1960s, the need for out-of-home care increased dramatically in Western societies as more and more women entered the workforce. Most countries in western Europe were quick to respond to the demands for needed child care. Child care and early education programs expanded dramatically in western Europe, especially for 3- to 5-year-olds. In Italy, for example, nearly 90% of all 3- to 5-year-olds attended government-supported early education programs in 1986, and more than 96% attend
today (Corsaro & Emiliani, 1992; Corsaro and Molinari, 2005). In the United States, on the other hand, most parents believed until recently that preschool children are better cared for at home (Mason & Kuhlthau, 1989). Such values now, however, clearly conflict with the reality of the American economy; by 1990, the majority of 3- to 5-year-old children of working mothers were cared for outside the home (Hofferth, Brayfield, Deich, & Holcomb, 1991). Still, both the government and parents remain ambivalent about young children’s moving outside the family before they reach the age when formal schooling begins.

Children’s participation in decisions about nonparental care or early education in preschool programs is limited. Once children enter child care or early education settings, however, their experiences in those settings and in routines with parents who evaluate their performance and progress can prepare them for coming transitions to formal schooling. For example, in our interviews with Head Start parents, Katherine Rosier and I found that mothers frequently drew their children’s attention to coming changes in their lives. One mother reported a story about her son, whom she had constantly reminded, “You’re doing great in Head Start this year and you’ll be going to kindergarten when you’re five years old.” The day after his 5th birthday in May, the boy awoke, dressed, and announced to his mother, “Well I’m ready to go to kinnygarten, Momma, walk me to kinnygarten.” When his mother said he had to wait until autumn, he protested, “But I don’t wanna go to Head Start no more, I’m five years old!” (Corsaro & Rosier, 1994, p. 7; also see Corsaro & Rosier, 2002; Rosier, 2000).

**Interpersonal and Emotional Influences**

Young children’s relations with adults (teachers, coaches, counselors, and others) and peers in settings where peer cultures emerge are, in many ways, affected by earlier parent-child interactional routines in families (Parke & Ladd, 1992). Children seek, in adult caretakers and peers, the emotional bonds and feelings of security they first established in families (Giddens, 1991; Ladd, 1992). It could be argued that this striving to maintain the sense of security first established in families is the basis of children’s formation of peer cultures. It is most certainly a strong factor in children’s valuing of participation and communal sharing in their peer cultures and friendship relations. We will examine the processes of sharing and friendship in initial peer cultures in Chapter 7. Here, it is useful to consider how children’s transitions from families to peer groups affect their relationships with others and their developing conceptions of friendship.
When children first arrive in preschools, they realize that their conceptions of ownership, possession, and sharing, which are based on their earlier experiences in families, are often not compatible with the interactive demands of preschools. Ownership is more tangible at home; some things belong to young children, other things to their siblings, and still other things to their parents. Problems with sharing these possessions, especially in families with one or two children, are most likely to occur when the young child has a visitor. On these occasions, the child is expected to share her or his possessions with playmates. Although children may resist, they soon learn that such sharing is temporary. Actual ownership of the objects is never challenged.

In preschools, things are different because all the toys and educational materials are communally owned. Thus, use of the toys and materials depends on negotiations for their temporary possession. It is in the course of these negotiations that children attempt to establish joint ownership of objects and of the play itself within a small group as well as to protect their sharing of the play against the intrusions of others. We will examine children’s tendency to protect their interactive space in the next chapter, but here let’s consider its more general significance in terms of children’s transitions from families to preschools.

In preschools, children are, in a sense, anchoring ownership to themselves and their playmates when they verbally mark off a specific area of play as shared and protected from others (“We’re playing here. Nobody else can come in.”). One result of these negotiations is a more advanced notion of ownership, one that goes beyond matching objects to individuals. Now children begin to see that some objects can be owned in common and shared with others in specific interactive events (Corsaro, 1988).

A second process in the protection of interactive space relates to children’s conceptions of friendship. Although no ethnographic studies demonstrate how parents arrange and encourage interactions between their preschool children and their peers in homes, some observational studies and surveys of parents provide suggestive data about these processes (Ladd, Profilet, & Hart, 1992; Lollis, Ross, & Tate, 1992). We know from these studies that parents do arrange and supervise informal playgroups. We also know that parents use a number of strategies for encouraging play and discouraging conflict (Thompson, O’Neill, & Cohen, 2001). However, none of the research looks closely at how these strategies relate to parents’ actual talk about friendship with their children in such situations. Therefore, we must rely on indirect evidence and on some of my own informal observations to speculate about parents’ talk about friendship in these situations.
It would appear from experiences in families that children come to see friends as other children with whom they come into contact. Adults tend to associate friendship and sharing ("Anna is your friend who has come to play, and you should share your toys with her"). As a result, children’s early conception of friend is primarily as a label for certain other children they know who have been designated as such by parents. In preschools, as we’ve discussed, sharing and friendship are often tied to children’s attempts to generate and protect shared interactive events. The concept of friend is no longer simply a label that is applied to a specific child. Rather, the notion of friendship relates to observable shared activities—playing together in specific areas and protecting the play from other children. Thus, children tend to mark the shared experience with phrases such as "We’re friends, right?" and to dissuade the access attempts of others with the words, “You can’t play; you’re not our friend” (Corsaro, 1979, 1985, 2003).

As we noted earlier, one outcome of children’s involvement in adult-child routines is the generation of disturbances or uncertainties for children. One source of such uncertainty is the simple fact that children are exposed to much more cultural information than they can process and understand. Unfortunately, disturbances also arise from the stress, conflicts, and even violence young children experience in their families. As psychoanalytic theorists point out, such experiences are especially emotionally stressful for young children who cannot understand why those whom they love so much can act in such unreasonable ways (Bettelheim, 1976). In such situations, children will often turn inward and blame themselves for parental failings. The activities and routines of peer culture can serve as therapeutic havens for confronting and dealing with anxieties from negative experiences in the family. Fantasy play with peers is especially important in these cases because it enables children to gain control over disturbing events and anxieties (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992).

**Symbolic Aspects of Children’s Cultures**

By *childhood symbolic culture*, we mean various representations or expressive symbols of children’s beliefs, concerns, and values (Griswold, 1994, p. 3). Three primary sources of childhood symbolic culture are children’s media (television, films, and so on), children’s literature (especially fairy tales), and mythical figures and legends (Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and others). Information from these three sources is primarily mediated by
adults in cultural routines in the family and other settings. Children, however, quickly appropriate, use, and transform symbolic culture as they produce and participate in peer culture. In this section of this chapter, we will consider primarily the characteristics of symbolic culture and children’s exposure to it. We’ll discuss children’s transformation and use of symbolic culture capital (that is, the specific items of symbolic culture that children possess and share) in their peer cultures in Chapters 7 through 9.

The Media

Although there has long been concern about the effects of television and to some extent films on children, electronic media have become much more complex to include DVD videos, computer video games, the Internet, cell phones, and MP3 players, with growing intersections of these different technologies ever evolving. Given these developments’ being in a state of flux and the recent huge increase in theoretical and empirical scholarship on this issue, my review in this section will focus on the extensiveness and what we know about the effects of electronic media in the lives of young children from birth to 6 years of age. I also will confine the discussion of effects to electronic media as related to children’s symbolic culture (television and film including DVDs) and consider computer technology (primarily computer games) in the section on children’s material culture. I consider the roles of children and adults in the children’s consumer culture in the final section of this chapter. I return to these same topics for preadolescents and to some extent adolescents in Chapter 9.

Although there is a great deal of debate about the effects of electronic media on young children, there is no dispute about the fact that young children are growing up immersed in media in the United States and many other industrialized societies. A recent large representative survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation of families in the United States (Rideout, Vandewater, & Wartella, 2003) found that children 6 and younger spend an average of 2 hours a day using screen media (1 hour, 58 minutes), about equal to the amount of time they spend playing outside (2 hours, 1 second), and well more time than they spend reading or being read to (39 minutes). More than one third (36%) of children have their own TVs in their bedrooms, and 27% of the children have VCRs or DVDs in their rooms. Some other interesting findings from this study are that children are active consumers of media as more than 77% turn on the TV themselves, 67% ask for particular shows, 62% use the remote control to
change stations, and 71% ask for their favorite videos or DVDs. The study also found that 65% of the children live in homes where the TV is on at least half the time and 36% live in “heavy” TV households where the television is always on or on most of the time. Despite these findings of regular exposure to the media, the survey found that reading or being read to was a constant in most of the children’s lives, with 65% of the children reading or being read to every day and another 26% reading or being read to a few times a week.

What should we make of these findings? Are the media contributing to the disappearance of childhood (Postman, 1994; Winn, 1984), or worse, in their gradual encroachment on print literacy, will they lead to moral decline and self-destructive violence (Sanders, 1995)? Or should we be asking instead whether there is an overreaction to fears about the growing presence and complexity of electronic media? Karen Sternheimer, for example, argued that instead of media’s being the culprit, other changes in childhood that are part of broader social changes have “made adults uneasy about their ability to control children and the experience of childhood” (2003, p. 22). In a similar vein the British media expert David Buckingham (2000, 2009) argued that it is necessary to situate children’s relationships with the media in the context of broader social and historical changes. He argued further that the focus should not be on excluding or protecting children from the adult world but rather on developing strategies to better understand children’s active role in media consumption, to increase their media literacy, and to protect their rights as citizens.

Most studies on the content of television programming involve criticism of its violence, lack of educational value, sexism, and appeal to hedonism (see Buckingham, 2000; Center on Media for Child Health, 2005; Seiter, 1993; Sternheimer, 2003, for reviews). Many studies, especially in the United States during the past 30 years, have focused on what Buckingham (2000) called “effects” research involving experimental studies often based on behaviorist or learning theories in line with the deterministic approach we discussed in Chapter 1. These studies have found both negative and positive effects of media on young children. There are numerous studies that document how media violence can contribute to anxiety, desensitization, and increased aggression in children in both the short and the long term (see Center on Media for Child Health, 2005, for a detailed review). On the other hand, the degree of these negative effects is debated regarding, for example, the way both violence and aggression are measured in these studies (see Buckingham, 2000; Sternheimer, 2003). Other negative health outcomes related to television viewing are less debated. Heavy television
viewing and having a TV in one’s bedroom were related to increased obesity in children (Center on Media for Child Health, 2005). On the positive side, effects research shows that educational television such as *Sesame Street* and more recent children’s programs such as *Blue’s Clues* and *Dora the Explorer* teach young children important skills for short- and long-term school success (D. R. Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001; Center on Media for Child Health, 2005).

We know little, however, about how children negotiate with parents for access to children’s television and other media, how they communicate with parents and peers about what they see, and how they appropriate, use, and extend information from the media. As Bazalgette and Buckingham argued, many studies “seem to underestimate the diverse ways in which children themselves may actually make sense of the media and relate them to their own experiences” (1995, p. 3). More recent research increasingly views children as active consumers of the media with adults and peers (Fingerson, 1999; Gotz, Lemish, Moon, & Aidman, 2005; Hoover & Clark, 2008; Kinder, 1991; Lemish, 2008; Seiter, 1993, 1999; Tobin, 2000; Walkerdine, 1997, 1998; also see Livingstone & Drotner, 2008, for a review of studies in this vein). Ellen Seiter’s (1993) analysis of toy-based videos for girls (*My Little Pony*) and boys (*Slimer and the Real Ghostbusters*) is a good example of this trend. She argued that such programs are much more complex than middle-class parents assume. Later in this chapter, we will discuss Seiter’s analysis of the toys on which these programs are based when we consider adult contributions to children’s material culture.

For most people, the mere mention of children brings to mind the Walt Disney Company and its vast empire of theme parks, movies, videotapes, and books. Yet the few studies by scholarly researchers who have examined the Disney Company and its products have focused primarily on the company’s marketing strategies, vision of childhood, and repackaging of classic fairy tales for mass consumption (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995; Giroux, 1996; Hunt & Frankenberg, 1990; Kline, 1993; Sternheimer, 2003; also see Buckingham, 1997, for a review of some of this and related work on Disney movies and theme parks). Sternheimer contrasted how Disney is embraced by many because its films “serve as cheerleaders for the American Dream” and because of its primarily moderate-right political values whereas other, more subversive media such as *South Park* and *The Simpsons* are seen as inappropriate and threatening of the innocence of especially young children (2003, pp. 106–107). Disney’s influence is seen as so great that some have voiced concern about its merger with ABC.
Television Group and its growing control over the global media market (see Wasko, Phillips, & Meehan, 2001, for discussion of Disney from a global perspective). Yet the roles that Disney images, characters, and stories play in children’s actual lives in families and peer groups remain relatively unexplored. A recent exception is a study of the perspectives on royalty in several Disney films of American immigrant girls from Korea (L. Lee, 2009). Lee found that the 5- to 8-year-old girls in the study had complex interpretations of being a ruler and a princess in the films that were at variance with certain critics of Disney in terms of gender and race. Lee noted that the

... girls were not simply passive receivers who unthinkingly absorbed every cultural message about the representation of royalty in Disney films. Instead, they often reframed and recreated a cultural text by actively selecting and organizing its elements according to their own experiences, assumptions, concerns, and desires. (2009, p. 211)

Literature and Fairy Tales

Numerous textual analyses of children’s books and fairy tales from a number of theoretical perspectives exist. Perhaps the most well known is Bruno Bettelheim’s (1976) *The Uses of Enchantment*, which presents a psychoanalytic interpretation of classic fairy tales. Maria Tatar (1992) relied on Stanley Fish’s (1980) notion of interpretive communities to criticize Bettelheim, other scholars of children’s literature, and much of children’s literature itself. Interpretive communities are practices or strategies we share as members of a community for organizing our experiences. They, in turn, preconstrain our construction of the meaning of texts. Tatar noted that most children’s literature and nearly every study of it address the interpretive communities of adults. Tatar and others (see Lurie, 1990) attempted to remedy this situation by focusing on subversive children’s literature, staying close to the surface level of the story, and attempting to adopt a children’s perspective. By “subversive children’s literature,” Tatar and Lurie meant stories in which children successfully challenge adult authority and in the process make adults look foolish (we made reference above to subversive media such as the television shows *South Park* and *The Simpsons*, which depict teenage alienation and well-intentioned flawed adults). A classic example of subversive literature is *Pippi Longstocking* by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren. The *Harry Potter* series shares many elements of subversion and empowerment of children
and youth. Tatar, Lurie, and others will always fall short in capturing children’s perspectives, however, because their analyses do not include children (or adults and children) constructing their interpretive communities over time.

One exception is a case study of two young girls, Lindsey and Ashley, which “demonstrates the innumerable ways in which books and other written texts lay beneath much of the everyday life of their family” (Wolf & Heath, 1992, p. 195). The case study is the result of a collaboration between Shelby Wolf, social scientist, lover of literature, and the mother of the girls, and Shirley Heath, anthropologist, linguist, and longtime ethnographer of literacy in children’s everyday lives (see Heath, 1983). Wolf was the ethnographer in this study, observing the role of literature in the lives of her girls from their birth until Lindsey was 9 and Ashley was 6. Beginning shortly after Lindsey’s 3rd birthday, Wolf’s ethnography became more focused and rigorous as part of her master’s thesis, and she began to routinely tape record reading sessions with both girls and to take notes on the children’s extension of their experiences with the texts into their daily lives.

Wolf and her husband read a wide range of books with their girls, from classic fairy tales to adult fiction such as To Kill a Mockingbird. What most interests us is the mediational processes in which children acquire symbolic culture and how they use such symbolic culture in their everyday lives. In this regard, Wolf and Heath’s analysis of their materials is richly textured with many wonderful instances of the symbolic culture of this family. The authors point out that the children played an active part in the readings. Although fascinated by stories with giants, dragons, monsters, and evil queens, the girls would, for example, often admonish their mother to “talk the dragon in a normal voice” because it was too scary. Wolf reported a frequent routine that occurred after readings of frightful stories in which she and her husband would hear Lindsey rummaging about in her room.

Her door would open and we would hear a loud clump. Then another and another. The door would close and we would hear her bedsprings squeak in final surrender. Curious, we would creep up the stairs, only to discover several of her “scariest” books lying abandoned outside her door. (Wolf & Heath, 1992, p. 138)

The longitudinal design of the case study allowed the authors to capture historical patterns in which information was first shared in reading sessions and then later reproduced, often in the voice and words of the
original characters, in appropriate contexts. What children consider to be appropriate contexts, however, can at times be a revelation to adults because children often achieve “potential recognitions of their own understanding of some element of literature in a totally new and unpredictable way” (Wolf & Heath, 1992, p. 122). Furthermore, “children’s visual, logical, musical, and linguistic insights can exceed those of adults, since children, when they read literature, may be motivated by their quest for transformative powers to make the external world conform more fully to their wishes” (Wolf & Heath, 1992, p. 122). This insight, which is clearly in line with our notion of interpretive reproduction, is nicely captured in numerous examples in which “Lindsey and Ashley transformed literature for their own purposes in negotiating attention, affection, and reason with adults and each other” (Wolf & Heath, 1992, p. 8). One memorable example of such transformation occurred as part of Lindsey’s and Ashley’s response to a deserved punishment. The two girls had been quarreling and three times interrupted their mother’s writing. Having lost her temper, Wolf reported,

I flung the dusty kitchen rug out the door and sent Lindsey up the stairs for the vacuum cleaner. I stationed Ashley at the sink to do the breakfast dishes. Both girls eyed me resentfully, but I ignored their pleas and went back to work. After a while, I realized that it was much too quiet and descended the stairs again, expecting the worst.

Instead, they were both happily scrubbing the kitchen floor. “I’m Laura and Ashley is Mary,” Lindsey explained. “We’re playing Little House in the Big Woods, and we’ve got to get the cabin clean for our mom!” (Wolf & Heath, 1992, p. 156)

In this example, argued Wolf and Heath, the girls “made their tasks acceptable by moving into the rules of the . . . girls’ world, where children obeyed their parents instantly and rarely squabbled” (1992, p. 156).

Although Wolf and Heath studied just one family and two children, their work provides a wealth of information about how children are exposed to and appropriate symbolic culture through literature. It also reminds us of the obvious but infrequently acted-on truth: Children are the best sources for understanding childhood.

Mythical Figures and Legends

A good part of the symbolic culture that children bring with them as they enter communal life with peers is drawn from cultural myths and legends.
Especially relevant are mythical figures such as Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and the Easter bunny, who are central to childhood culture and lore. A virtual legion of other imaginary figures inhabits children’s literature and media. Parents introduce these mythical characters to children and regularly interweave them into their childhoods through what are often deeply cherished rituals. Furthermore, the meanings of these family rituals are enhanced by the subroutines that make up their overall structure—subroutines that are ripe for embellishment in the local cultures of the families. For example, most American families produce the general Easter bunny ritual but often vary the subroutines of its production. Eggs may be colored in different ways and at different times, they may be hidden inside the home or outside in the yard on Easter morning, children may follow a variety of rules when hunting for the eggs, and so forth. Thus, when children come together in neighborhoods, preschools, and kindergarten and elementary school classrooms and playgrounds, their joy and wonder in the embracement of these mythical figures is doubly exalted. They discover not only shared and valued childhood symbolic culture capital but also myriad variations for expressing and appreciating their shared wealth.

We are all familiar with family rituals regarding Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and the Easter bunny in American culture. Before turning to some recent and very interesting research on such myths and legends in our own culture, though, let’s briefly look at the role such legends play in family rituals in two other societies. We begin with an example that is both geographically and culturally distant from our own society: Gaingeen, a bogey that appears among the Murik of Papua New Guinea. We then move closer to home to discuss La Befana, a witch from Italy.

**Gaingeen.** Anthropologist Kathleen Barlow studied the Murik, a fishing and trading society of Papua New Guinea. The Murik are, according to Barlow, “fervently animistic” in that they believe in a number of “spirits who display human-like tendencies toward mischief, deceit, and irritability” (1985, p. 2). One of these spirits is Gaingeen, who appears sporadically in the village to chase and beat children, “if he can catch them, which he seldom does” (p. 3). Gaingeen never speaks but rather conveys his intentions through threatening gestures such as kicking and shaking the spears and sticks he always carries with him.

Infants and toddlers first encounter Gaingeen when parents or older siblings carry them out to observe the bogey during one of his appearances in the village. The young children often are terrified and cling tightly to whomever is holding them. Some parents go right up to Gaingeen and hand him their children (see Exhibit 6.1).
Gaingeen comes to play an important part in caretaker-child routines in Murik households. Murik caretakers prefer to use indirect tactics such as distraction to get young children to stop crying or to dissuade them from undesirable behaviors. Once Gaingeen has been introduced, he is frequently called on for this purpose.

Mothers who want to wean a child call, “Gaingeen you come o! She/He wants to nurse again here.” Older siblings hurry their dawdling juniors along the path saying, “Yeay! Hurry up! Gaingeen is coming!” Grandmothers recall wandering toddlers from doorways and windows, “Eeee! Gaingeen, Gaingeen!” (Barlow, 1985, p. 4)

As children grow older, they learn that Gaingeen usually does not come every time he is called. Still, he may appear, and the young child

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Source: Photo by David Lipset.
will always look around to see if Gaingeen is coming when caretakers call his name.

When children are about 4 years old, they normally venture outside the home to play in mixed-age groups in the village under the care of older siblings. In these instances they tag along with the older children, who sometimes make Gaingeen costumes and engage in a form of approach-avoidance play, which we will discuss in the next chapter. When the younger children see their older siblings wearing costumes, they realize that the real Gaingeen, the one they have seen in the village, may be someone in costume as well. They are still afraid of Gaingeen, but they now become suspicious. Could he also be an older child or an adult in a costume?

Eventually, when the children are 7 years old or so, the “secret of the mask figure is revealed and the children discover he is an adolescent boy wearing a costume” (Barlow, 1985, p. 1). Despite this demystification, Gaingeen remains an important figure in play and learning throughout childhood. As we will see in the next chapter, the children appropriate Gaingeen and create their own peer routines in which he plays a central role in their attempts to deal with more general fears and anxieties.

La Befana. In Italy, children are fascinated by the mythical character La Befana (see Exhibit 6.2). La Befana, who is believed to have originated in southern Italy, is a witch who flies about on a broom bringing presents to children on January 6, at Epiphany. (Epiphany, or Three Kings’ Day in some cultures, is a church festival commemorating the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.) According to legend, the three wise men stopped to ask La Befana for directions on their way to Bethlehem. They also invited her to join them. La Befana told them she was too busy sweeping and sent them away. Afterward, she was filled with remorse and tried to follow. She couldn’t catch them and has been flying around Italy ever since, looking for the Christ child. She leaves presents at the house of each child in case one of them is the Savior (see Corsaro, 2009a).

This legend seems to have been altered somewhat in contemporary times, with parents warning their children that La Befana does not leave presents for bad children. She is said to slide down chimneys on her broom, delivering presents to good children and filling their stockings with candy, whereas bad children get switches or a lump of coal. Some mothers even tell their naughty children to behave or La Befana will steal them away. Many children, however, come to see La Befana as more than a benevolent arbiter of good and bad behavior. They view her as someone
who, like Babbo Natale (the Italian Santa Claus), always comes through in the end with presents for all children.

In my observations in northern Italy, I found that children look forward to receiving gifts at Christmas from Babbo Natale, but they are just as excited about La Befana’s coming several days later. Parents often actively promote the legend by constructing images of the witch in their homes, yards, and neighborhood parks. Like Gaingeen’s, some of La Befana’s appeal to children is the fact that she is both mysterious and frightening. In fact, Italian preschool children frequently debate the power of various threatening figures such as witches. In one preschool I studied, children frequently talked about la Strega (the witch). One little girl, Antonia, explained to me that witches do not really exist, that they are “per finta”
Children’s Cultures

(for pretend). But she later pointed out that “la Strega e il Dracula sono gli amici” (the witch and Dracula are friends).

Antonia’s view of witches such as La Befana symbolizes the children’s attraction to monsters. Monsters do not really exist, but we can pretend they do. And this pretense often has a tinge of reality, especially if the threatening agents are introduced by parents and are part of cultural legends, like La Befana and Gaingeen. These fascinating and threatening figures are appropriated from the routines and rituals in the family and are reproduced as part of routines in peer culture by the Murik and Italian children. We will look at the nature of these routines and their importance in peer cultures in Chapter 7.

The Tooth Fairy. What of children’s mythical and fantasy figures in the United States? How are they introduced to children in the family, and how do they become part of children’s symbolic culture? In her book Flights of Fancy, Leaps of Faith, Cindy Dell Clark (1995) went directly to children and parents to explore the rituals and meanings of Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, and the Easter bunny.

Perhaps the central insight in Clark’s analysis is that children actively participate in and contribute to the dynamics of these mythical legends and rituals. Clark argued that children influence the interactive process of culture in two ways: (a) “The symbolic association of children with certain cultural values (including nature, as well as the capacity for wonder and awe) gives them implicit influence within ritual practices,” and (b) “children directly affect cultural practices through their own actions” (1995, p. 103). Let’s look at how these cultural processes are demonstrated in one of the mythical figures Clark investigated, the tooth fairy.

Although many cultures have shed-tooth rituals, “the Tooth Fairy is largely a Western custom, having evolved in the cultural melting pot of the United States” (C. Clark, 1995, p. 10). The ritual surrounding the tooth fairy involves a rite of passage. In a traditional sense, it is a reward for the physical pain and mental anguish that can accompany losing baby teeth. Clark found that most of the children she studied placed their lost teeth in a special receptacle, a tooth fairy pouch, to wait for the tooth fairy to replace it with money. Such pouches are often handcrafted items that are embroidered or hand sewn. They call attention to the feminine aspect of the ritual, with the tooth fairy (always a female) representing the healing and therapeutic mother comforting and rewarding children for their loss. But the ritual is prospective as well as retrospective. In retrospectively celebrating the loss of the tooth shortly after it has occurred, the ritual also
marks the beginning of an occurrence that will have many repetitions (the loss of additional teeth in exchange for money from the tooth fairy). In this way, the ritual encourages children’s awareness of ongoing transitions in their lives and helps prepare them for these changes.

Tooth loss and the tooth fairy ritual coincide with another important change in children’s lives—their entry into formal schooling during kindergarten or first grade. Children are now deeply embedded in an initial peer culture and are becoming aware of their movement during the next few years into middle childhood and preadolescence. With this transition will come more personal autonomy and more responsibility. Clark had no direct data on activities in peer culture, but she did point to children’s valuing of the power and independence that money from the tooth fairy can provide. One child remarked how having money made him “feel like a new person,” and another observed, “I like carrying around my own money. I feel more grown up and special” (C. Clark, 1995, p. 19).

Undoubtedly, children share similar observations with their friends and see their loss of teeth, participation in the ritual, and acquisition of money as signs of maturity. The ritual is especially appealing to children of this age because of its repetition or reoccurrence and because of the inevitable accumulation of wealth. Clark noted that when she talked to children about money from the tooth fairy, they “were prone to run and fetch their stash of cash and to finger through it, Scrooge-like, while showing it to me” (1995, p. 19). Finally, Clark’s reference to kindergarten and first-grade teachers’ practice of keeping charts marking the occasion when children lose teeth also supports the notion that the ritual is highly valued in peer culture.

Let’s now return to Clark’s argument regarding children’s active participation in the production of the tooth fairy ritual. The beginning of second dentition occurs when children are 6 or 7, a period of transition marked by children’s movement from families to formal schooling. Clark maintained that adults (especially mothers) actively support the magical fairy as a way to keep children young, to extend their belief in fantasy. As a result, the spotlight in the ritual is on children whose sense of wonder and awe is reassuring to parents who would prefer they not grow up too fast. Children, on the other hand, with their successive shedding of baby teeth and growing embeddedness in peer cultures, come to view the process through a different lens, with a “more mature focus” (C. Clark, 1995, p. 105). With the loss of baby teeth and the accumulation of material cash wealth, children feel older, more independent, and more like their peers.
As Clark suggested, the process also involves children’s gradual understanding of the underlying essence of faith and trust as represented by the belief in mythical figures such as the tooth fairy and Santa Claus. These mythical figures serve as what British psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott (1951) called “transition objects” in children’s growing separation from their parents, in whom they have invested blind faith and trust. In the end, children do not so much discover that the tooth fairy is really Mom and Dad as they come to realize that their firm belief in the tooth fairy has been an expression of their faith in the unconditional love of their parents. They also discover that the seeds of this faith can be passed on through their participation in the same cultural rituals with their own children.

Material Aspects of Children’s Cultures

By childhood material culture, I mean clothing, books, artistic and literacy tools (crayons, pens, paper, paints, and so forth), and, most especially, toys. Children can, and often do, use some of these objects to produce other material artifacts of childhood cultures (for example, pictures, paintings, block structures, improvised games and routines, and so on). In addition to the more traditional dolls, blocks, cars, LEGO, and other toys, more and more young children are now playing computer or video games. The Kaiser Family Foundation study discussed above found that 48% of children 6 and younger have used computers and 30% have played video games (14% of those 3 and younger and 50% of 4- to 6-year-olds; Rideout et al., 2003). There is a growing market in video games for younger children from the VTech and Techno Source toy companies that are modified versions of Sony’s PlayStation 2, Microsoft’s Xbox, and Nintendo’s Game Cube, now available for preschoolers (Marriott, 2004). With these new types of toys available, at least for the middle-class and wealthy families who can afford them, children are entering electronic game playing at younger and younger ages. Also, many of these games are related to children’s symbolic culture as they are tie-ins to movie themes and characters. Most of the games are educational in nature, and future electronic games that soon may be available to children are aimed at early literacy development. Some of these games, which involve touch-screen controls, can now be accessed through applications on parents’ cell phones and will soon be available for young children on the iPad that has just been introduced as an extension of the iPhone as a touch-control or hands-on computer.
Much of the research related to children’s material culture focuses exclusively on toys. Most of it is carried out by psychologists; it is quantitative (experimental and quasi-experimental) and is designed to test hypotheses regarding the effects of specific content or features of toys on children’s individual development. For example, a great deal of research exists on toys and gender stereotyping and the effects of war toys on aggressive behavior (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987; Goldstein, 1994). Such a focus is too narrow and too similar to that of the effects research on symbolic culture. Very little of this research examines children’s actual play with toys. Some research examining play with objects such as LEGO and other building materials, toy animals, dolls, cars, and other toys finds it not only is fun for kids but can contribute positively to their mathematical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (Corsaro, 2003; Johannesen, 2004; Morgenthaler, 2006; Ness & Farenga, 2007; Sawyer, 2002). We will discuss several of these studies in Chapter 7. However, we now turn to the work of historians and marketing researchers, which has revealed a great deal about children’s interest in and play with toys.

Studies by historians and marketing researchers show that as children develop as individuals, they collectively and creatively appropriate, use, and infuse toys with meaning, both in families and in their peer cultures. These findings are in line with the notion of interpretive reproduction in that they demonstrate the importance of children’s collective actions and how these actions contribute to the productions of innovative peer cultures as well as to reproduction and change in adult society. The main reason historical and marketing studies identify the importance of the children’s collective actions is because their research designs (which are more qualitative and interpretive in nature) do not close themselves off from such possibilities to test how toys affect individual development.

Historical Studies of Children’s Material Culture

As Brian Sutton-Smith has argued, the “predominant nature of play throughout history has been play with others, not play with objects” (Sutton-Smith, 1986, p. 26; also see Chudacoff, 2007). Objects were often incorporated into play but were second in importance to the social aspects of play. As a result, almost any physical object that could enhance a play theme would do. These objects, sometimes referred to as “playthings,” varied over time, from sticks and stones to tires, tin cans, and coat hangers. Such objects were transformed to fit the arising themes of play and did not have fixed meanings. According to Mergen (1992, p. 88),
however, two new attitudes toward toys emerged in the 1870s. First, children began to develop a desire for the accumulation of toys for their own sake, with material possessions indicating the status of the owner. Second, toys began to be seen as defining the identity of the child and childhood culture.

Historical studies based primarily on the analysis of autobiographies capture how these two attitudes toward toys often overlap. An excellent example of such overlap is Formanek-Brunell’s (1992) study of dolls and doll play in the 19th century in the United States. Doll play before the Civil War was infrequent and was linked to learning and developing sewing skills and other kinds of domestic training. In the decades after the war, things were quite different. Middle- and upper-class girls were “encouraged by adults to imbue their numerous dolls with affect, to indulge in fantasy, and to display their elaborately dressed dolls at ritual occasions such as tea parties and while visiting” (Formanek-Brunell, 1992, p. 108). Although girls certainly adopted this attitude toward their dolls to some degree, they did not simply internalize the adult values as part of feminine socialization. On the contrary, the girls often had a different agenda as they appropriated and used the dolls “for purposes other than training in the emotional and practical skills of mothering” (p. 108). In the autobiographical data, women reported rebelling against sedate tea parties as girls by sliding their dolls down banisters atop tea trays and, in another case, wreaking havoc on their tea party “by smashing their unsuspecting dolls to bits” (p. 123). In fact, the physical mistreatment and even torturing of dolls was commonly mentioned in the memoirs. Most of these accounts involved the acts of boys, usually brothers, with the girls often looking on more in fascination than in horror. One woman remembered, “When my brother proved my doll had no brains by slicing off her head, I felt I had been deluded; I watched him with stoicism and took no more interest in dolls” (p. 121). Still, girls themselves also carried out such mistreatment, often in response to imagined misbehavior on the part of their dolls. For example, an article in a girl’s magazine on doll play in 1908 reported a “four-year-old girl disciplined her doll by forcing it to eat dirt, stones, and coal” (p. 122).

Such behavior was often seen by adults of the time as the expression of repressed anger. In fact, adults encouraged a form of play that many might find horrific or at least in bad taste today: the enactment of doll funerals. According to Formanek-Brunell, doll funerals were much more frequent than doll weddings among middle-class girls in the 1870s and
1880s. She pointed out that “mourning clothes were packed in the trunks of French lady dolls, and Fathers constructed doll-sized coffins for their daughters’ dolls instead of the more usual doll houses” (1992, p. 117). One woman remembered, “No day was too short for a funeral, just so they [my friends] all got home for supper” (p. 123). Such play was not seen as morbid but was viewed as helping to develop the nurturing and comforting skills that often were needed in a time when many relatives and friends died young. Girls, however, did not simply imitate proper comforting behavior in their doll funerals. Girls often changed the emphasis from cathartic funerals to ritualized executions or harrowing accidents that led to death. (Again, the adult model was appropriated, not simply internalized.)

It is important to keep in mind that autobiographical data of this type have certain validity problems (such as the faulty or selective memory of the author) and that they allow for limited generalizability given the upper-class backgrounds of most of the authors. Regarding generalizability, many working- and lower-class girls could not afford store-bought dolls, let alone the luxury of destroying them. Still, these historical materials provide direct evidence and therefore lead to more valid conclusions than does simply inferring the nature of play from the mere existence or content of toys. As Mergen noted, “toys have meaning only when children play with them,” and if toys “are meaningful to the child they will be reused and remembered” (1992, p. 106). It is the symbolic meaning and value that children attach to toys that most interests market researchers, whose main aim is to understand children as consumers of toys and other material goods. It is to this work that we now turn.

Marketing Studies of Children’s Material Culture

Developmental and educational psychologists who study children’s material culture normally focus on the effects of various play objects and toys on children’s cognitive and social development. They rely most often on quantitative, quasi-experimental, or experimental studies to estimate the educational value of toys and how play with various toys might contribute to children’s cognitive growth and structure. In this approach, less attention is paid to children’s toy preference or to the actual processes of children’s play with the toys. Market researchers, on the other hand, have little interest in scientifically documenting the effects of toys on children’s development (except in cases where they aim
their goods at parents; here they do not hesitate to cite scientific research). Their research, argued Kline, “is both pragmatic and proprietary, but that in itself hasn’t prevented the cultural industries from gaining insight into contemporary children’s everyday experiences of play, fiction and leisure” (1993, p. 18). Relying on more qualitative methods such as focus groups, informal interviews, and direct observation, these researchers “don’t bother to observe comatose children in the classroom being battered with literacy; they study them at play, at home watching television or in groups on the streets and shops” (p. 18). What they discover is that aspects of children’s symbolic and material culture, such as “daydreams, hero worship, absurdist humour and a keen sense of group identity”—which academic researchers (and most adults) may see as “meaningless distractions or artefacts of immaturity”—are important attributes of children’s cultures (p. 18). As Kline noted, marketers make good use of these insights in their strategies for selling things to children, whom they see as highly informed and powerful consumers (p. 18). One thing market researchers have discovered is that one appeal of certain toys and media products is the very fact that children realize that adults will not like such products and even see them as schmaltzy or disgusting and gross. This point relates to our earlier discussion of how children desire to gain control over their lives and challenge the power of adults.

In her book about children’s consumer culture, Sold Separately, Ellen Seiter (1993) developed many of these basic themes. Seiter rightly noted that in contemporary American society it is mothers who most often ultimately decide on their children’s consumption of symbolic and material culture. Today’s mothers “may object to children’s consumer culture, but they often give in to it as well, largely because of the usefulness of television programs and toys as convenience goods for caretakers of children” (Seiter, 1993, p. 8). In doing so, mothers often feel guilty that they are relinquishing their children to a superficial and hedonistic consumer culture.

Like Kline (1993), Seiter did see a certain value in children’s consumer culture. She stressed especially the communal nature of children’s shared culture with friends and classmates and its “strong imagination of community.” Here, Seiter extended Kline’s argument to point out that adults too “invest intense feeling in objects and attribute a wealth of personal and idiosyncratic meanings [to] mass-produced goods” (1993, p. 9). After all, is a sweatshirt with a Los Angeles Lakers or Indiana Hoosiers logo any more educational (or less expensive) than one with Mickey Mouse or Tweety Bird?
Seiter’s point about similarities between adult and child consumer culture relates to our earlier discussion regarding the tendency of adults to evaluate children’s activities prospectively. In other words, we adults most often take a linear view of development; we are concerned with how the present experiences of children contribute to their futures as adults. But surely, in terms of symbolic and material culture, children have some right to enjoy their childhoods!

Children’s consumer culture does, of course, have some negative attributes. Parents are rightly concerned about the effects of their children’s preferences for repetitive play with toy guns or grossly disproportionate Barbie dolls. In fact, Seiter argued that many aspects of children’s media and toys promote negative images in regard to class, race, and gender in American society. On the other hand, she also noted that educationally endorsed and politically correct toys are often very expensive and can be elitist. She pointed, for example, to European-produced toys such as Playmobil’s Victorian Dollhouse. The dollhouse retailed at $185 in 1993 and came with a description that introduced the character Vicki,

> a little girl from a good home who lived during the turn of the century. . . . Vicki’s family belonged to “high society,” because after all her father was the Chancellor of Commerce. Naturally, you can understand that Vicki should be raised by a governess. (Seiter, 1993, p. 218)

Ouch! My daughter got one of these dollhouses for Christmas when she was seven; however, I never heard her talk about Vicki and the governess. Of course, my daughter also owned and played just as often with her inexpensive Gumby, Tweety Bird, and My Little Ponies.

Studies of children’s consumer culture such as Kline’s and Seiter’s are important because they take children—their perspectives, preferences, and shared cultures—seriously. They also look at children’s consumer behavior as embedded in a complex interactive system. In this system, children are dependent on parents (usually mothers), but they are active negotiators in decisions regarding the purchase of toys and their access to the media through television and movies. However, a glaring omission in this work is adults’ and children’s joint participation in children’s consumer culture and how that participation is mediated by the nature of marketing strategies and the social class background of consumers. Here recent work by social scientists on children, parents, and consumer culture addresses these issues.
Children, Parents, and Consumer Culture

As Cook (2009) has noted, merchants, marketers, and advertisers have engaged with children as consumers for the better part of a century. This recognition of the child consumer, as often mediated through parents, can be seen in the advertising and marketing of a wide range of products including books, clothing, food, and most especially toys. In his book *The Commodification of Childhood*, Cook (2004) examined historical patterns in trade journals and other documentary sources. His work shows how conceptions of the consuming child were materialized in the creation of separate children’s clothing departments, segmented by age and gender gradations. His analysis captures “how contemporary childhood and consumer culture have become interwoven, asking whether one can any longer exist without the other” (2004, p. 151).

In his book *Kids' Stuff*, Gary Cross (1997) presented a historical account of the marketing of toys and the roles of parents and children in their consumption. He noted that until the end of the 19th century parents gave children few toys and the toys they did provide reflected the tastes of adults more than the desires of children. This pattern changed in the early 1900s, and the idea of toys as a part of children’s own material culture emerged. However, adults were still very much in control of the process. In this period most toys were designed to train or prepare children to be adults through imaginative play with, for example, erector sets and trains for boys (the engineers and scientists of the future) and dolls and dollhouses for girls (future mothers and homemakers). However, by the 1960s, with adult occupations becoming more complex, changing, and unpredictable, such toys became less popular, and giant toy companies such as Mattel and Hasbro marketed more directly to the imaginations of children. These companies began to advertise toys on television especially on shows aimed at children such as the *Mickey Mouse Club* and a wide variety of cartoon programs.

These advertisements provided scripts for how to play with toys, and Cross argued, “by the early 1980s, these companies and others turned cartoon TV programs into half-hour commercials featuring specific toys as the cartoon characters” (1997, p. 5). These changes led to other, more recent marketing strategies that linked toys to films and also to fast food restaurants, which provided toys such as action heroes, Barbie dolls, race cars, and later Pokémon cards (among many other such items) as part of special or “happy” meals for children. This process of what Spigel (1992, quoted in Cook, 2009, p. 339) referred to as “intertextuality” involves the
extension of media characters and narratives beyond a single medium or genre. The purpose of this marketing strategy is to produce the characters, narratives, toys, and related products from the sellers’ perspective. With intertextuality consumption is always multiple. As Cook noted,

"Watching the SpongeBob SquarePants show, for instance, is in itself a form of brand exposure, but having the Kraft Corporation’s SpongeBob Macaroni and Cheese meal for lunch is exposure to a brand of another order. When a child eats the Kraft Corporation’s macaroni with the character on the box, she also simultaneously ingests SpongeBob and Nickelodeon Network (its corporate owner) as a kind of semiotic fare which accompanies the carbohydrates, protein, fat and sodium. (2009, p. 339)."

This type of intertextuality of marketing to children was attacked by consumer action groups such as Action for Children’s Television. Such groups were successful to some extent in pressing for the passage of legislation to protect young children by forcing programmers to more clearly demarcate commercials from programming. However, many critics such as Julie Schor (2004) bemoan the power of marketers whom Schor argued have co-opted children, parents, and even schools into their strategies to create “commercialized children.” Others (Buckingham, 2000; Cook 2008, 2009; Cross, 1997; Sternheimer, 2003, 2010; Wasko, 2008) acknowledged the power of marketers, the commodification of youth culture, and the complexity of today’s media culture but also recognized the agency of parents and children to be insightful consumers. These authors, above all else, called for increased consumer literacy. Cross, for example, near the end of his book captured this position well when he argued that adults “must develop the skills to raise independent children in, rather than against, a culture of consumption” (1997, p. 237).

Although the work reviewed above tells us a great deal about children, parents, and consumer culture, it is told from a distance, relying on historical and archival materials. What are missing are actual parents and children participating in consumer culture with each other and with their peers. Some recent ethnographic studies address this gap. We will consider one here that involves mainly younger children and a second in Chapter 9 when we discuss the media and consumer culture among older preadolescents and adolescents.

In her book *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*, Allison Pugh (2009) observed 5- to 9-year-old children attending three economically and ethnically diverse after-school programs in Oakland, California. She also interviewed many of their parents and
parents of other children she observed from the areas of the city where the schools were located.

Pugh’s analysis of consumerism on the part of the children and their families is not so much related to individual desires, wants, or needs but is rather primarily about children’s collective belonging—fitting into their peer groups in the present and maintaining or improving their collective social status in the future. Right away we see how this type of ethnographic research differs from the effects studies of media and marketing that focus on individuals isolated from social and cultural context. In the local peer cultures in the three after-school programs, Pugh studied how the children created and participated in what she called “economies of dignity.” These economies had “their own scrip, or meaningful tokens, their own norms about managing children’s conversations, and their own processes of negotiating value” (Pugh, 2009, p. 52). Scrip could range from material consumer goods such as Game Boys, Pokémon and Magic cards, and Bratz and American Girl dolls. However, they also included shared experiences with families and friends that were consumer related such as birthday parties, visits to amusement parks, and vacations. Pugh did not find some competitive hierarchy related to the expense of scrip. Rather the children vied to lay claim to having similar scrip to that of their peers or to be able to do what the sociologist Erving Goffman (1967) termed the necessary facework to maintain dignity when ownership of the particularly valued scrip was lacking. It was in this facework that children were particularly innovative and creative. For example, one boy in a low-income after-school program was unable to name toys or special trips he had made to fill in a poster about what he was thankful for as some of his peers had done. Instead the boy, urged on by a supportive friend, said he was thankful for his ancestors, something clearly valued by his family. Pugh noted another example among wealthy children wherein one boy claimed to have as many as 600 Pokémon cards and then another boy countered saying he had been given $500 for his birthday from his grandmother. Taken aback by such extravagance, a third boy was speechless for a moment but then said, “I’m saving money for college.” Such examples aptly illustrate the collective nature of peer culture and how consumer artifacts and experiences get embedded in myriad ways in the children’s strong desire for a sense of belonging to the group—a key feature of peer culture that we will discuss at length in the next chapter.

Both the wealthy and low-income parents Pugh interviewed were attuned to the relation between consumerism and their children’s economies of dignity. Therefore, fearing “differences that threatened their
children’s social belonging,” parents generally reported being responsive to their children’s consumer requests (2009, p. 90). Wealthy parents worried more about the influence of the media and the hedonistic aspects of consumer culture and set rules for the use of consumer goods. They also normally gave children allowances from which they could save to make their own purchases. The lower-income families worried more about how to afford things their children wanted than media influence or the objects’ intrinsic value. However, in contrast to typical portrayals of reckless spending by the poor, the lower-class parents in Pugh’s study planned carefully for purchases by saving or waiting for times of unexpected cash flows (also see E. Chin, 2001, for an insightful analysis of the complex practices in consumer culture of poor, Black, preadolescent children).

In a novel twist, Pugh also discussed evidence in her interview data of what she called “pathway consumption.” This type of consumption involves “spending on the opportunities that shape children’s trajectories” or “a combination of aspiration and uncertainty we might identify as hope” (2009, p. 178). Here much of what Pugh identified, like private lessons, summer camps, or changing residence to be in a neighborhood with better public schools, is in line with Annette Lareau’s (2003) notion of a “concerted cultivation” that we discussed in Chapter 5. Unlike Lareau, however, Pugh found the desire for pathway consumption among lower-class families as well, but it was most often blocked by lack of resources or what Pugh called the luxury of difference that affluent families took for granted. As in Lareau’s study, we see how insidiously social reproduction works.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter, we explored the concept of children’s peer culture and how it relates to interpretive reproduction. We defined peer culture as a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers. This view of peer culture is in line with interpretive reproduction in that it stresses children’s collective actions, shared values, and place and participation in cultural production. Families play a key role in the development of peer culture in interpretive reproduction. Children do not individually experience input from the adult world; rather, they participate in cultural routines in which information is first mediated by adults. However, once children begin to move outside the family, their activities with
peers and their collective production of a series of peer cultures become just as important as their interactions with adults. Furthermore, certain elements of peer cultures also affect adult-child routines in the family and other cultural settings.

We also focused on children’s introduction to elements of peer culture in the family. Children’s peer cultures are affected by adults, most especially in adult-child routines in families, in two ways. First, important features of peer cultures arise and develop as a result of children’s attempts to make sense of and to a certain extent resist the adult world. Second, children’s experiences in the family prepare them for entry into initial peer cultures in that parents arrange for and structure their children’s early interactive experiences with peers, provide them with emotional support and foster interpersonal styles or orientations, and introduce them to both symbolic and material aspects of children’s culture. We examined children’s introduction to symbolic and material aspects of peer culture in the family in some detail. We saw that parents introduce children to symbolic culture (that is, various representations or expressive symbols of children’s beliefs, concerns, and values) by the way they control and encourage their children’s access to media, literature, and mythical figures and legends. Parents introduce children to material culture (that is, books, artistic tools, and toys) through their purchase of, and their encouragement of certain types of play with, such cultural objects. In line with interpretive reproduction, we reviewed studies that attempted to capture how parents and children collectively negotiate access to material culture and how they interpret and use symbolic and material culture in everyday routines and rituals in the family. In this review, we noted that children often extend and transform symbolic and material culture that they first attain in the family in their interactions with peers. We now move to a discussion of children’s production of preschool and preadolescent peer cultures in Chapters 7 through 9.