

Protecting children from the violence of consumerism: Educating for peace in a consumer society

Sue L. T. McGregor PhD Professor
Faculty of Education
Mount Saint Vincent University
Halifax, NS B3M 2J6 Canada
sue.mcgregor@msvu.ca
902-823-2625
www.consultmcgregor.com

July 18-19 2013

Paper (panel discussion) presented at the
International Summer Course on the Rights of the Child
Université de Moncton, Moncton NB Canada
<http://www.umoncton.ca/rightsofthechild/>

This conference is focused on Article 19 (protection from all forms of violence) of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). Article 19 states children have “the right to protection from *all forms* of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or *exploitation...* while in the care of parent(s), legal guardians (s) or *any other person* who has the care of the child. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the *establishment of social programmes* to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child...” (p. 7, emphasis added). In the spirit of Article 19, the basic premise of this paper is that living in a consumer society, shaped by the ideology of consumerism, is a form of violence and exploitation from which children need to be protected, both those consuming and those making the consumer products.

Consumerism as Structural Violence

For clarification, consumerism is an ideology with an attendant belief system while consumption is marketplace behaviour informed by this ideology (McGregor, 2007, 2013). Sklair (2010, p. 136) described the ideology of consumerism as “a set of beliefs and values, integral but not exclusive to the system of capitalist globalization, intended to make people believe that human worth is best ensured and happiness is best achieved in terms of our consumption and possessions.”

Consumerism is the misplaced belief (the myth) that people will be gratified by consuming. In this sense, consumerism is an acceptance of consumption as a way to self-development, self-realization and self-fulfilment (McGregor, 2010). In a consumer society, people’s identity is tied to what they consume (Marcuse, 1964). Consumerism is “economically manifested in the chronic purchasing of goods and services, with little attention to their true need, durability, origin of the product or the environmental consequences of manufacture and disposal” (Verdant.net, ca. 2010, web citation).

Recently, people have begun to characterize consumerism as a form of structural violence. As a concept, structural violence strives to account for the injustice, marginalization, exploitation, oppression, discrimination and other social ills that exist because of the way society has organized itself. Violence occurs because of the way society is structured. Structural violence is almost invisible, embedded in the ubiquitous social structures, and normalized by stable, enabling institutions and by people’s regular experiences and patterns of living (McGregor, 2010).

Structural violence can occur in *any* society if its institutions and policies are designed in such a way that barriers are built into society leading to some people being harmed due to no action of their own. Because these social inequities are longstanding, they usually seem ordinary, the way things are done, and always have been; hence, they go unchallenged. The results are unequal power and unequal life chances. Structural violence leads to social inequalities, injustice, insecurity and infringement on

human rights (McGregor, 2010).

Consumption has become the cornerstone of most people's daily lives - it is a social institution, defining daily patterns of living. Unsustainable consumption occurs because the entire *consumer infrastructure* is a key source of structural violence. To explain, due to the structure of the global economy and the consumer marketplace (product and service development, packaging, marketing, advertising, distribution chains, retailing), it is almost impossible to buy a product without harming others, other species and/or the environment. The ideology of consumerism exacerbates this untenable situation because people believe they are defined by what they buy and own.

Because of this structural violence, consumers inadvertently contribute to unsustainable consumption and development whether they intended it to or not. It is unthinkable for most people that they are perpetuating the onslaught of human rights infringements, war, injustice, inner turmoil or ecological destruction when all they do is have a coffee with a friend, buy a bottle of water for safety, buy a new pair of blue jeans, or have a hot chocolate on a cold winter's day. Who would have thought these innocuous, mundane purchases were underpinned by structural violence? But, they are. The labour behind the product or service, the intensity and externalities of production processes and the end-chain disposal issues create injustices around the world (McGregor, 2007, 2010).

Children as Consumers and Labourers

Children are not immune to the effects of living in a consumer society shaped by the ideology of consumerism. There are close to 2 billion children in the world. A decade ago, children and youth aged 8-14 (twens) spent and influenced an astounding \$1.18US trillion per year, on a global level (Lindstrom & Seeybold, 2003), and that number just keeps rising. This figure represents 3% of the global consumption of goods and services by all citizens, which, nearly ten years ago, topped \$30 trillion dollars annually (McGregor, 2007). The \$1.18 trillion does not account for the influence of children younger than eight, an age cohort that deeply shapes their parents' and caregivers' consumption behaviour (Calvert, 2008). Children are an increasingly powerful and smart consumer group. Yet, in general, child consumers are very vulnerable because their cognitive processing skills are not fully developed. Their critical thinking, reasoned judgements, resistance to persuasion and manipulation, and ability to assign appropriate meanings to messages emanating from the marketplace are in question, and usually deficient (Calvert, 2008; John & Whitney, 1986; McNeal, 1987).

Child Labour

Couple this vulnerability with the vagaries of the consumer, capitalist society and children truly do need protection from the violence of consumerism, both the children doing the consuming and the children involved in the production of consumer goods.

Regarding the latter, twenty percent (one in five) of the children in the world aged 5-17 are engaged in economic activity, called 'children in employment' (n=306 million). Nearly three quarters of these same children are involved in child labour (70%, n=215 million) (Diallo et al., 2010).

As a basic definition, child labour refers to the employment of children in any work that deprives children of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school, deprives them of their potential and dignity, and that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful (International Labour Organization, 2013). In more detail, "*Child labour ... is a subset of children in employment*. It includes those in worst forms of child labour and children in employment below the minimum age, excluding children in permissible light work if applicable (Diallo et al., 2010, p.17). The worst forms of child labour include, but are not limited to, abuse, working in confined spaces, using heavy and/or dangerous equipment, unhealthy environments, long hours, night work and all forms of slavery, forcible confinement, prostitution and illicit activities (Diallo et al.).

Educating for Peace in a Consumer Society

Clearly, Article 19 of the Convention applies both to the violence being experienced by the children consuming and the children labouring to make the consumer goods. This paper focuses on the children doing the consuming, in hopes that their changed behaviour will have positive outcomes for the children labouring to produce the goods and services. Indeed, this paper argues that children in a consumer society are oppressed and exploited.

People who are oppressed are being exploited and taken advantage of due to their circumstances. They feel they cannot flee from, or change, what appears to be, irreversible conditions (McGregor, 2006). In a consumer culture, people are so indoctrinated into the logic of the market that they cannot see anything wrong with what they are doing. Because they do not critically challenge the market ideology and the myth of consumerism, they actually contribute to their *own oppression* (i.e., become slaves of the market) and the oppression of others who make the goods and services. They also contribute to oppression of the ecosystem (McGregor, 2010, p. 197)

In order for children to see how their consumer behaviour is oppressive and exploitive, their cognitive skills need to be turned on and honed. Parents and teachers play central roles in this process and carry deep responsibilities relative to protecting children from the reverberations of their consuming life. Whether or not they know it, parents and guardians *do* socialize their child(ren) to be consumers (Moschis, 1987). As well, children are entrusted into the care of teachers within the educational system (an example of a social program that supports children as they mature and develop into

adults, see United Nations, 1989). When discussing children as consumers, McNeal (1987) asserted that “[t]he influence of school teachers on the development of the child cannot be overestimated... [They are] important agents in the consumer socialization process of children; they are important because of what they teach and important because of their central role in the child’s life” (p.19). They have a major impact on the consumer socialization of children (McNeal).

Features of a Consumer Society

In order to protect all children from the violence of a consumer society, educators need to understand the challenges of educating for peace and human rights in a consumer society. Youth and educators are steeped in a consumer culture. If something is steeped, it is drenched, saturated, immersed and imbued (filled with a feeling). Embeddedness in the subtleties of a consumer culture means anyone teaching today’s youth must educate them about what it means to *live* in a consumer society. A consumer society has [t] market values at its core: competition (win-lose mentality), wealth, profit, individualism (self-interest), scarcity, efficiency, materialism and status, and growth (McGregor, 2013). This ideological banner leads people away from peace, despite that the act of consuming is integrally intertwined with global justice, rights, sustainability, security and the human condition (McGregor, 2007, 2010).

As well, a consumer society has several prevalent characteristics that are key indicators of its inherent unpeacefulness: alienation, dissatisfaction, disenchantment, misplaced self-identity, and false relationships. Respectively, a consumer society is devoid of communal values. It tricks people into a state of permanent disappointment and unmet expectations. Betrayed and unhappy, people fill the void by unfulfilled spending, creating the crippling sense of disillusionment and disenchantment. Longing for some sense who they *are*, people define themselves by what they own (creating a false sense of identity) instead of finding meaning in relationships with other humans, species and nature. The resultant disconnect between self and the rest of the world leads to crippling unhappiness and the compulsion to fix things by spending, spending, spending (McGregor, 2010, 2011b).

Features of a Culture of Peace

The counterpoint to all of this is peace education and the principles of a culture of peace. Remember that youth and educators are steeped in the consumer culture. Once something is infused into something else (like tea steeped in water), it is almost impossible to separate them again. What is needed is a new infusion; students need to be steeped in a culture of peace. The steeping process enables something to release its active ingredients. The active ingredients for a culture of peace are strikingly different from those of a consumer culture. A culture of peace represents an everyday attitude of non-violence, and fierce determination to defend human rights and human dignity. All relationships will be premised on peace. Hope, persistence, solidarity, inclusiveness

and morality will be the norm. Principles of tolerance, open mindedness, sustainability, participation and democracy are paramount (McGregor, 2005, 2010).

A global awareness and perspective, cooperation and a deep respect for interdependency are key features of a culture of peace as are responsibility and accountability. Mutual support, empathetic listening and unwavering respect for human rights and dignity are solid anchors for peaceful cultures. Constant striving for justice, freedom, non-violence, equity, equality and ongoing, rigorous critique of the ideological status quo are the roots of a culture of peace. The community is the main reference point, with the well-being of all citizens coming before the self interest of the few. As well, the concept of community will have expanded beyond people to include animals, fish, birds, plants, air, water, earth and wind, all seen as inter-connected, interdependent, cooperative and mutually supportive (McGregor, 2005, 2010).

Reframing Article 19

The amount of time something is steeped depends upon the purpose of the preparation. Given that our entire world is profoundly shaped by the consumerism ideology and the consumer culture that perpetuates this ideology (Sklair, 2010), from a young age, students need to be steeped in a culture of peace. Educators must embark on the path of peace education and a culture of peace, sooner than later. This path will not be easy. It will be rife with disorienting moments and ideological shocks and changes. Indeed, educators exposed to courses on building peace in a consumer society undergo a profound paradigm shift, akin to the grieving process of the loss of a familiar world view (McGregor, 2008).

But, our youth need our help. They are deprived from power and liberation from the oppression of consumerism due to their underdeveloped cognitive abilities, which receive a relentless, daily pounding by the juggernaut of consumerism. Their ability to resist and transform the power of consumerism requires educators to ensure students learn critical thinking, rhetoric and argumentation, dialogue and deliberation, and values reasoning. These skills will offset their inability to judge, assign meaning to and resist the cacophony of messages emanating from the consumer culture. Educators also need to focus on educating the parents and the guardians of the vagaries of the consumer culture so they can bring a different perspective to their role as consumer socialization agents for their children. And, in the spirit of Article 19, educators need to accept that consumerism *is* a form of structural violence and then balance their curricula and pedagogy with insights from a culture of peace and non-violence.

These are powerful first steps toward socializing today's youth to be citizens first and consumers second, focused on the mutual well-being and interest of humanity and the earth (see McGregor, 2010, 2011a). To creatively reframe Article 19, children have the right to protection from the structural violence of a consumer culture and the ideology of consumerism while in the care of parent(s), legal guardians (s) or *any other*

person who has the care of the child (especially their teachers and educators). Such protective measures include a pedagogy of peace, justice and non-violence to provide the necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child. From this educational stance, with refined cognitive skills, the youth doing the spending can crawl out from under the oppression of the consumer culture, and challenge the ideology of consumerism with alternative perspectives. As youth and then adults, they will then 'spend differently' such that the youth making the consumer products (child labourers) are less likely to experience the fallout of the violence of consumerism. All children could then be protected from the insidious, ubiquitous violence of capitalistic consumerism by being infused with the principles of a culture of peace.

References

- Calvert, S. L. (2008). Children as consumers: Advertising and marketing. *The Future of Children*, 18(1), 205-234.
- Diallo, Y., Hagemann, F., Etienne, A., Gurbuzer, Y., & Mehran, F. (2010). *Global child labour developments*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization. Retrieved from <http://www.ilo.org/ipecinfo/product/viewProduct.do?productId=13313>
- International Labour Organization. (2013). *What is child labour?* Retrieved June 9, 2013 from <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang--en/index.htm>
- John, D. R., & Whitney, J. C. (1986). The development of consumer knowledge in children: A cognitive structure approach. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12, 406-417.
- Lindstrom, L. & Seeybold, S. (2003). *BRANDchild*. London: Kogan Page.
- Marcuse, H. (1964). *One dimensional man*. London: Routledge.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2005). Transdisciplinarity and a culture of peace. *Culture of Peace Online Journal*, 1(1), 1-12, <http://www.copoj.ca/pdfs/transdisciplinarity.pdf> Available at http://www.consultmcmgregor.com/documents/research/transdisciplinarity_and_culture_of_peace.pdf
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2007). Consumerism, the common good and the human condition. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 99(3), 15-22.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2008). Transformative education: Grief and growth. In M. Gardner & U. Kelly (Eds.), *Narrating transformative learning in education* (pp.51-73). Toronto, ON: Palgrave MacMillan.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2010). *Consumer moral leadership*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2011a). Consumer education philosophies: The relationship between education and consumption. *ZEP: Journal for International Education Research and Development Education*, 34(4), 4-8.
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2011b). Peace through consumer education. *Nurture*, 5(1), <http://chek.edu.pk/NURTURE11.2.pdf>
- McGregor, S. L. T. (2013). *Fostering ideological awareness for consumer professionals* [Monograph Series No. 201301]. Seabright, NS: McGregor Consulting Group. Retrieved from <http://www.consultmcmgregor.com/documents/publications/ideological-reframing-for-consumer-professionals.pdf>
- McNeal, J. U. (1987). *Children as consumers*. Toronto, ON: Lexington Books.
- Moschis, G. P. (1987). *Consumer socialization*. Toronto, ON: Lexington Books.
- Sklair, L. (2010). Iconic architecture and the culture-ideology of consumerism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 27(5), 135-159.
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child* [A/RES/44/25]. Paris: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/44/a44r025.htm>
- Verdant.net. [ca. 2010]. *How consumerism affects society*. Dallas, TX: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.verdant.net/society.htm>