Opinion

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The impact of capitalist-led neoliberal agenda's on parents and their children

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Abstract

One of the most important social relationships in any community is that of parent and child. Parents and primary caregivers are typically tasked with raising their children; however, they are but one of many social agents and structures that contribute to childrens' overall socialisation. Children's beliefs, values and behaviours are influenced by the broader social systems in which they are raised, including social and economic ideologies. This commentary aims to build an argument based on a broad collection of literature and research, that Australia's current variegated form of neoliberalism has the potential to create friction within the parent–child relationship, and questions about the social morality of this position are raised.

Introduction

Parenting can be one of the most satisfying and joyous of roles, but given it is a fulltime responsibility often filled with conflict, confusion, worry and stress, it is undeniably challenging to get 'right' (Hays, 1996; Liss, Schiffrin, Mackintosh, Miles-Mclean, & Erchill, 2013; Roy, Schumm, & Britt, 2014; Sanders, Lehmann, & Gardner, 2014). The extent of stress and worry can vary depending on the circumstances in which a family exists. Geographical location, family circumstances, socio-economic conditions and health amongst myriad other personal and social issues can impact on parents' experiences of parenthood and children's experiences of childhood (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2010; Roy et al., 2014). With increasing numbers of children reporting some form of adversity, whether it be obesity, emotional disturbance, hyperactivity, abuse, developmental delays or bullying, there is a growing body of literature that reports the trends, causes, consequences and solutions to these and other social problems (Deater-Deckard, 2004; Jennings, Perez, & Gonzalez, 2018; Hinshaw, 2018; Katz, Coley, McDermott, McPherran, & Yaya, 2010; Martin & Rice, 2012; Moore, 2008; O'Connor & Scott, 2007). While these issues are sometimes associated with broader social systems and inequalities, often the focus is on the individual and their immediate micro-systems, with parents regularly being held accountable for children's poor outcomes (De Brún, McCarthy, McKenzie, & McGloin, 2013; De Coster, 2012; Prins & Toso, 2008; Suissa, 2006). A narrow focus on the family as a primary source of childhood ills means strategies for intervention are typically directed at parents (Axford, Lehtonen, Kaoukji, Tobin, & Berry, 2012; Porzig-Drummond, Stevenson, & Stevenson, 2014) and may mean that systemic failures are overlooked or not adequately explored (Sturm, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to provide critical examination of how a neoliberal ideology and its driving mechanisms – capitalism, consumerism, materialism and globalisation – might negatively impact on parent–child interactions. Specifically, it will be argued that the ways in which neoliberal ideas encourage individualistic as opposed to collective social structures, and that the push for a materialistic and consumerist culture has a potentially adverse impact on the parent–child relationship.

The nature of childhood in Australia

Before examining the ways in which neoliberal principles potentially influence children, let us first consider what is meant by children and childhood. Human ontogeny is characterised by four stages – infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood – each stage, while not clearly defined or absolutely linear, is described by specific biological characteristics and psychological development. From a chronological or developmental perspective, childhood and adolescence are prolonged compared with most other social mammals, the reasons for which are speculative. Bogin (1998) contends that childhood allows for an extended period of parental engagement for the acquisition of social and technical skills, and Tomasello, Melis, Tennie, Wyman, and Herrmann (2012) argue that many important skills begin early in human development because they take time to prepare, learn and mature. While biological and psychological concepts of child development are, for the most part, fixed, the social aspects of 'childhood' are not so clearly demarcated by natural or universal phenomena (Tomasello & Gonzalez-Canrera, 2017), but

rather a set of socially constructed cultural ideas and norms, and therefore viewed differently between cultures and across time (Bornstein & Bradley, 2014; Roy et al., 2014).

A stream of sociological and anthropological research demonstrating the complexity and diversity of contemporary conceptions of childhood around the world has developed (Archard, 2004; James, 2010; Mayall, 2002; Olwig & Gullov, 2003; Qvortrup, 2005a; Richard, 1998; Sargeant, 2014; Shanahan, 2007). Nation-states organise their children's environments based on developmental priorities, virtues considered culturally desirable and the pragmatic needs of the family, community and society. As such, there is diversity between nations about the age in which children can participate in a variety of activities such as work, marriage, consuming alcohol, driving and a host of other socially constructed norms. The diverse cross-cultural perceptions of childhood consolidate the idea that childhood is a socially constructed concept and that an ethnocentric Westernised view is one of many (Frones, 2005). While cross-cultural theories of childhood are interesting and important, the focus of this paper is childhood in contemporary Australia.

Even when focussing on a single culture, there is not one definition of childhood. In fact, it is a concept full of contradiction and ambiguity (Qvortrup, 2005b; Spyrou, 2018). For example, the United Nations says that children should not be viewed as simply adults-in-the-making, yet society often defines and treats children in terms of their biological and psychological deficits (Wyness, 2006) and expose and encourage them to emulate adult behaviours and mores (Schor, 2004). At the same time, children are not only viewed as innocent and in need of nurturance but also deviant and in need of control and regulation (Jenks, 2005), and they are simultaneously viewed as living in a time of care-free play and protection, yet being pushed into competitive pursuits as they are trained for work and future adult success (Elkind, 2007; Wintersberger, 2005). Despite these dualities, modern-day childhood is generally considered a stage on the road to adulthood in which physical, cognitive and emotional maturity has not yet been attained. Thus, children are separated from the adult world and assume different roles. For the most part, they do not work or play in the adult realm, cannot make sexual choices and do not have the same political or legal rights or responsibilities. The modern vision of childhood, as characterised by innocence, naturalness and vulnerable dependence, has seen increased sensitivity to children's needs and emerging child-centred ideologies in education and health systems, the home and social policy (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009a, b; Wyness, Harrison, & Buchanan, 2004).

Parental and state responsibility to children

Children rely on their parents and other caregivers for physical, emotional and moral support (Katz et al., 2010; Wyness et al., 2004), and today's biological parents are usually charged with the responsibility of raising their children. Parents have the right to bear and rear children in a manner of their choosing (Archard, 2004; Sanders & Mazzucchelli, 2013; Children, Youth and Families Act, 2005); consequently, children's daily experiences are largely shaped and controlled by their parents and other adults in their life (Baumrind, 1991; Bornstein, 2013; James & James, 2004). While parents have a right to autonomy and privacy with interventions by the state being neutral and impartial (Archard, 2004), this is, of course, with an underlying expectation that parents will provide children with conditions and experiences that are in their best interests and within a legal framework reflecting cultural values, such as protection from harm (Archard, 2004; Bromfield & Holzer, 2008). If parents are unable to provide an adequate level of care and protection, then the state takes over responsibility for their care (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2018).

Thinking about a macro level of influence, parental practices are largely driven by goals implicit in cultural norms (Katz et al., 2010; Levine, 1998), and these appear to be aligned with the fundamental rights exemplified by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which says children should have 'the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life' (Adamson for UNICEF, 2013). Daily parenting practices are, however, typically guided by the people around them, expert advice and resources, their own experiences of childhood and trial and error (Borg Xuereb, Abela, & Spiteri, 2012; Khoo, Bolt, Babl, Jury, & Goldman, 2008; Livingston, 2014; Roy et al., 2014; Sanders et al., 2014; Sidebotham, 2001). Expert sources of information serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of what constitutes 'good' parenting practice and 'normal' childhood outcomes (Australian Early Development Census, 2015; Hoffman, 2003; Sanders et al., 2014). These messages convey an array of inherent assumptions that represent the norms, ideals and cultural expectations placed on parents. These are, however, sometimes in competition with other dominant ideologies, which can create an internal paradox and an environment of conflict and stress for some parents (De Coster, 2012; Liss et al., 2013; Sanders et al., 2014).

In combination with contemporary discourses of parental rights, there is a strong focus on parents' responsibility for their children's socialisation. This is particularly evident when children experience poor outcomes or exhibit anti-social behaviour, for which parents are considered culpable (Featherstone, 2017; Newcombe & Loeb, 1999; Rossendale Scribbler, 2015; Wyness et al., 2004). This is perhaps unsurprising in a neoliberal state which promotes individualism, where structural inequalities are often converted into individual problems, and people are responsible for their own fate (Brown, 2003; Smith, 2012). As Bauman (2000) comments, 'individualization is a fate, not a choice' and that 'In the land of individual freedom of choice the option to escape individualization and to refuse participation in the individualizing game is emphatically not on the agenda' (p. 34). Coinciding with a culture of parental blame is a rising trend in parental 'over'-investment (Hays, 1996; Wall, 2010). Some modern parents are likely to view their children's achievements as their own parental accomplishments and take pride in their parental prowess (Hays, 1996; Hoffman, 2003). If parents are feeling judged on their children's achievements, then there is a logic to over-investing in children's present to ensure their future success (Brown, 2014). As Vandenbeld Giles (2014) says, based on a neoliberal model, parents invest in their children as forms of social capital. Even as early as infancy, there is a sense of 'achievement' if baby sleeps through the night or when they reach certain milestones such as rolling, sitting and crawling, for example (Ennis, 2014). While pride and investment in children's achievements can act as positive reinforcers and stimulate pro-social parenting behaviours, Elkind (2007) contends that over-investment by some parents has led to a new childhood ideology that he calls the 'hurried child'. Childhood, to him, is no longer about play and protection, but rather a competitive training ground for future success in the adult world. This too could be explained by neoliberal ideas that value the individual over society and which dismantles important social bonds and

promotes ego-driven behaviour (Smith, 2012). Like most concepts addressed here, however, this should not be thought of in black and white or absolute terms – we would not want to fall into the dark side of binaries (Weller & O'Neill, 2014) – but rather observations of cultural trends amongst some families to greater or lesser degrees. This is not to suggest that those parents who lean in the direction of over-investment are likely to be so rigid that they do not offer their children play and protection, or that all childhood ills are considered the fault or failure of parents, but rather there appears to be a growing trend or inclination in these directions, which of course are mediated by social structures such as class, culture, ethnicity and gender.

Just as parents have obligations to their children, as a signatory to the UNCRC, the state is required to make provisions for children and families to meet most of the UNCRC standards and is committed to children's welfare. For instance, the Victorian government's vision for its young people is that they are provided with every opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their family circumstances and background. This vision and governments' broader commitment to young people's wellbeing can be seen in state and federal legislation and policy that promote fair and equitable standards of living for all (such as National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020 and Victoria's Children, Youth and Families Act 2005). Despite Australia's neoliberal tendencies that discourage state intervention, Australia also remains a welfare state with government run and/or financed welfare initiatives that deliver a relatively high standard of health, education, income support and initiatives that support children and their families. Having said that, there is a wide gap between espoused ideals and socio-political actions. While policies use language such as child-centred and family-focussed, some would argue that with the dismantling of the welfare system, vulnerable children are often the casualties of broken social structures, and the innocence and vulnerable dependence mentioned above are not being protected (Brown, 2003; Buckingham, 2000; Fernandez, 2014). As will be discussed later, the social aspects of government responsibilities sometimes compete with the overriding economic responsibilities, and it is quite often the children from disadvantaged families who are more likely to experience the consequences of hardship (Redden, 2017; Wright, 2016).

Neoliberalism by any other name

In addition to parent and state contributions to childhood welfare and outcomes, there is a multiplicity of modern ideologies that impact on children's experience of childhood. In this post-modern age, the plurality of these ideologies is vast, complex and often competing. Notwithstanding the social-democratic ethos that underscores the welfare state, many would say that the dominant ideology, and driving force behind Australia's current economic success, is the neoliberalist market economy (Cahill, 2007, 2010; Wright, 2016) or at least a variegated version of neoliberalism (Weller & O'Neill, 2014). With the existence of government-owned enterprises (albeit depleting in number) and government subsidies that bolster some industries, some would say that on a scale of international comparison, Australia is considered a neoliberal state (Redden, 2017). However, others, such as Weller and O'Neill (2014), argue that despite superficial similarities to neoliberal traditions, Australia is best described as having a 'developmental' policy framework and maintains an autonomous presence over non-state based economic interests.

Others, like Nobel prize laureate Joseph Stiglitz (2019), argue that markets do not work, and governments need to function in ways that can alleviate the problems it creates.

Not only does the complexity of Australia's economic and social processes make it difficult to pin-down but also neoliberalism is a somewhat slippery term without a definitive or consistent definition or description (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009). As pointed out by Higgins and Larner (2017) in a series of edited chapters, it is a fragile, messy and incomplete concept. They say that 'neoliberalism is constituted from multiple and diverse elements...Each of the contributions highlights the complex ways in which social, environmental, political and economic arrangements or projects are held together in provisional "neoliberal" formations without necessarily adding up to a coherent neoliberal whole' (p. 16).

For the purposes of this paper, the term neoliberalism is being used to describe a hegemonic economic governance that displaces welfare and interventionist state agendas by normalising individualism and personal responsibility (Higgins & Larner, 2017) in a manner that promotes materialism and consumerism. One of the main features of the neoliberal philosophy is the promotion of a free market that is not encumbered by state-based regulation or control. It is benefited by globalisation and is characterised by individualistic capitalist ideals that drive marketisation and consumerism (Smith, 2012). Capitalism is an economic system characterised by a free market, whereby goods and services are privately owned and operated for profit with minimal intrusion or control by governments. As Dunlop (2012) suggests, for capitalism to succeed, it needs to be loved and it uses advertising or marketisation as a form of courtship to cultivate that love. The premise of a free market is that goods and services that are worth having will win out, and corporate success, therefore, is dependent on producing desirable commodities. This notion suggests that the free market is a level playing field and that consumers, who vote with their purses, have some level of control about what is produced. Consumer choices and decisions, however, are not necessarily made autonomously. With strategic marketisation, global corporations create an excitement about their products and are therefore able to dominate the market and promote consumer spending. Marketers are continually developing new products and convincing consumers that they need or want them, but in truth, the marketers are also creating the need and want, often through, as will be argued later, unprincipled means that prey on people's vulnerabilities (Calo, 2014; Rosen, 2013). Capitalism has benefited greatly from globalisation, which has opened international economic borders; and contemporary globalisation processes have cultivated an international exchange of information, ideas, products and services, which have been propelled by advances in international transportation and telecommunication infrastructure (Mascarenhas, 2002; Wright, 2016). The proponents of neoliberalism assert that not only does private enterprise and a free market create wealth but is also responsible for elevated human well-being (Adib & El-Bassiouny, 2012; Finn, Nybell, & Shook, 2010; Harvey, 2005; Wright, 2016). However, others argue that the efficacy of some aspects of neoliberalism is being questioned, particularly with regard to its creation and maintenance of inequality. Neoliberalism may not be completely dead, as Stiglitz and other economists argue, but it is certainly being challenged, which leads to the premise of this article, to question its relevance on moral grounds.

Neoliberalism is not only a set of economic policies that facilitate free trade, maximise corporate profits and challenge welfarism but it also 'involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action' (Brown, 2003). The

central argument being put forward here is that one such social action being affected is family relationships. It is not so much the economic arguments about whether Australia is a neoliberal state that is of interest in this commentary, but rather the perceived pressures that the current system, particularly the push for consumerism as a social and economic trend that encourages the purchase of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts appears to be having on individuals, groups and communities.

As discussed earlier, children are considered vulnerable dependents in need of protection from the adult world, but in some ways, neoliberalism and consumerism, in particular, have opened the floodgates between the adult world and childhood with child-directed advertising (Laczniak & Palan, 2004). Indeed, a whole new target category known as 'tweens' has developed which sets them apart from other age groups and adults. A dominant capitalist and neoliberal philosophy contends that everything can be treated as a commodity and everyone is treated as a consumer, and this does not preclude children (McDonald, Gough, Wearing, & Deville, 2017). Children are a category of consumer, indeed a category with growing spending power, and are considered important economic players in the global marketplace (Adib & El-Bassiouny, 2012). Just like adults, they are appropriately placed to be seduced by marketers and consumerism generally (Adib & El-Bassiouny, 2012). A predominant message, indeed cultural norm, for today's children is one of consumption (McDonald et al., 2017). Hill (2011) suggests that corporations define children, and by implication their parents, by their spending capacity and, consequently, 'the structure of childhood is eroding and children are suffering from serious physical, emotional and social deficits directly related to consumerism' (p. 347).

The effects of consumerism on childhood

What, if anything, is wrong with a consumer mentality? Economic growth has undoubtedly improved the material standard of living for many people through innovation (though perhaps less so for the poorer members of communities), which has seen an increase in life expectancy and decrease in infant mortality, not to mention making life more comfortable with the advent of cars, washing machines, air-conditioners and more (Nardinelli, n.d.; Nye, n.d.; Wright, 2016). However, along with the many other criticisms of neoliberalism (such as poverty for those at the bottom of the capitalist market and the destruction of the environment), it could be argued that neoliberalism, in general, and consumerism, in particular, also jeopardises aspects of health and quality of life (Laczniak & Palan, 2004; Schrecker, 2016). Today's children and adolescents are less likely to be sheltered from the adult world and are encountering phenomena typically associated with adulthood, such as increased mental health issues and concomitant use of medications, violent and sexual images, gambling and obesity, amongst others (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). Scholars have explored links between aspects of neoliberalism on children in relation to child development, violent and sexualised behaviour, racism, health, poverty and the exploitation of women; all with unfavourable outcomes (Finn et al., 2010; Schor, 2004; Sweeting, Hunt, & Bhaskar, 2012). This is apparent in a study of child well-being in 21 economically advanced nations which found that the USA and UK ranked lowest in terms of children's overall well-being (Adamson for UNICEF, 2013). Australia was not ranked because of insufficient data, but given much of its economic and social values are aligned, indeed led by the USA and UK, one might expect that Australia would also attain a fairly

low ranking. While some argue that neoliberalism builds a strong economic position (particularly for those countries and people who are already financially secure), this study suggests that it does not bode well for children's overall well-being.

Parents, often with the best intentions, purchase products that claim to teach infants and young children skills that are typically not expected of them until a later age (Gillis, 2003; Nairn, 2013). For example, Baby Einstein™ products are selling an image or promise of unlocking babies' potential, and parents are encouraged to use these products at a very young age, as is the case for one parent who was quoted on their website as saying 'My son is 9 months old and has been enjoying your videos from 3 weeks of age!'. The very name, *Baby Einstein*, sends a message to parents that by purchasing these products, they are providing their baby with opportunities to develop an intellect comparable with the world-renowned physicist, Albert Einstein. This is not to suggest that these products are harmful to infants, but there is no evidence that they add any more to a baby's experience than can be gained from interacting with their caregivers and others in their immediate environment. Perhaps, as suggested above, the clever marketing of these types of products preys on parents' vulnerabilities and concerns about their abilities and whether they are parenting well (Sanders et al., 2014).

Moreover, children are repeatedly subjected to the allure of consumerism at a very young age (Adib & El-Bassiouny, 2012; Laczniak & Palan, 2004). Many everyday items are associated or tied-in with media characters with whom children become familiar and are then more likely to desire because of the familiarity of the image, as opposed to independent preference for that particular product. Corporations, and their marketers, prey on this familiarisation by incorporating characters into a range of products including, but not limited to, books, tooth paste, board games, clothing and food wrappers, as an effective way of maintaining the familiarity of the product and coaxing children into wanting more (popular examples include Barbie, Dora, Disney characters and The Wiggles) (Finn et al., 2010; Laczniak, & Palan, 2004; Ogle, Graham, Lucas-Thompson, & Roberto, 2016). This can be problematic because the structured nature of these toys, games and media can inhibit spontaneous make-believe play and stifle children's creativity and imagination. When children are surrounded by toys seen on television, they are likely to mimic the conversations and storylines they have seen in the program as opposed to free-play through which they develop their own imaginations and problem-solving skills (Bickford, 2010). By supressing creative play in this way, we are potentially depriving children of the key-learning strategies used for initiating ideas and actions and self-generated control over their environment (Hill, 2011).

Consumerism and marketisation also contribute to the identity formation of children or, as Hill (2011) contends, the destabilising of childhood and child identity. A constant bombardment of media messages encourages children to define themselves and each other by their capacity to consume (McDonald et al., 2017). This is the antithesis of creativity, uniqueness and critical thinking and instead dictates their thought processes, thus destabilising their own self-determined identity. Moreover, the messages being conveyed often contribute to the formation of detrimental identities. Children, girls, in particular, are faced with a stream of images and messages of capitalist-led gender identity, which influence their perceptions and behaviours as they strive for what they perceive to be gender norms and to which they should aspire (Frost, 2005; Hill, 2011; Rosen, 2013). These messages often reinforce unfair and out-dated hegemonic stereotypes and inequalities

(Ey, 2014). In the pursuit of corporate profit, girls and young women are encouraged to see themselves as little more than aesthetic objects to be judged by appearance. This self-image is beneficial to marketers who can capitalise on girls' and women's aspirations to be socially desirable by selling them products that can augment their attractiveness and help them reach the 'feminine ideal' (Hill, 2011; Kilbourne, 2004; Wild, 2013). One could argue that marketers are proficient at creating a market as well as supplying it or, at the very least, agitate consumers' insecurities or vulnerabilities and then sell products to remove any socially induced discomfort. Previously directed at adolescents and young women, the corporation cross fire is now squarely aimed at tweens who, as a new target group with greater spending power, are the consumers of today, as well as the next generation of adult consumers, hence the need to promote brand loyalty at a younger age (Marketing Week, 2005; Nairn, 2013; Sargeant, 2014).

In addition to issues related to self-identity and development, more children are experiencing health concerns that were once concentrated in the adult population. Obesity and related health effects, alcohol and other drug-related health outcomes, sexually transmitted diseases, diminished eye, oral and hearing health and mental illness appear to be on the rise amongst younger cohorts (Dinneen, 2008; Han, Lawlor, Kimm, 2010; Landle, McHale, & Booth, 2013; Lobstein, 2013). The rates of suicide and internalised emotional disturbances such as depression and anxiety fluctuate, but there has been a steady growth in the incidence of both since the 1960s (Kolves, n.d.; McGorry, 2006). Schor (2004) found that children who were more immersed in consumer culture had higher levels of depression and anxiety, lowered self-esteem and experienced more psychosomatic complaints. She also found a convincing relationship between increased time spent watching television and involvement in consumer culture. A study of eight European countries found that 63% of parents acquiesce to their children's purchasing requests for the high-sugar and high-fat foods they have seen advertised and that this is associated with weight gain (Huang et al., 2016). Having said that, there does not appear to be Australian-based research that examines the relationship or impact of consumer culture on children's health or well-being.

In response to criticisms about the effects of consumer culture on children, it could be argued that parents, as the primary decision-makers, can make choices that they consider to be in the best interests of their children. While ultimately this is true, this argument is short-sighted because we know that cultural norms are influential on parents as well as children. It assumes that individuals are 'rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for self-care' and that it is 'entirely a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences' (Brown, 2005, p. 42). And, more importantly, why should parents have to compete with unhealthy cultural norms to protect their children's health? This leads to the principal question being raised here – to what extent does the parent–child relationship suffer when parents contest the messages infiltrating their children's values, attitudes and beliefs through marketisation and a growing consumer culture, and the individualising competitiveness promoted through neoliberalism?

Having said that, it is again important to recognise that not all children are the same or impacted in similar ways. Obviously, children are not a homogenous group, and they will respond to their environment differently. While some children may be highly influenced by consumerism, others may be less so, and others still may take an active stance against it by advocating for issues of social justice, the environment, anti-consumerism and so on.

The impact of neoliberal messages on parent–child relationships

The daily barrage of media campaigns to purchase and consume is not new to adults, but the targeting of children is a more recent and pervasive phenomena (Schor, 2004) and one that is only increasing with the development and expansion of social media (Papasolomou, 2012). Compared with earlier generations, most modern children have more possessions (Redmond et al., 2016), which begs the question: do they crave more, expect more and demand more given they are being socially constructed to do so (McDonald et al., 2017; Papasolomou, 2012)? Children are a lucrative market and are treated accordingly by multinational corporations who have something to gain by penetrating the cultures of childhood and parenthood. While there is evidence of ways in which neoliberalism, and consumerism, in particular, can affect children, little explicit concentration has been paid to the ways this can impact on parent–child interactions and relationships (Nairn, 2013). Not only can we ask what is at stake with the commodification of childhood, but what is at stake if market forces are driving a wedge between parents and their children?

Parents and children are not impervious to marketing messages and cultural norms based on capitalist gains. This is unproblematic for families who agree with the consumer mentality (providing they can afford it), but how does it affect parents who make decisions that do not conform to consumer norms, but have children who do? There is certainly nothing new about disparate views between parent and child (such as bedtime or curfews), as it has always been a parent's role to enforce rules and regulations in the name of healthy development and wellbeing. However, with an ever-expanding list of unhealthy capitalist-led demands by children who are indoctrinated by a consumer culture comes increased refusals by 'informed' parents. For example, research suggests that it is not uncommon for children to attempt to influence household purchases and many parents give in to pester power (Huang et al., 2016; Turner, Kelly, & McKenna, 2006). And, as children get older, they are better able to use the specific information garnered from advertisements to sway their shopping decisions (Laczniak & Palan, 2004). This has the potential to create growing discontent between parent and child and unnecessary family tension. Perhaps even more troubling than the sometimes oppositional positions taken by parents and children is a finding by Schor (2004) that children's increased levels of consumer involvement were associated with worse relationships with parents. She attributes this, in part, to explicit anti-adult messages in advertising that ridicule parents and encourage psychological separation between child and parent. She says some advertisers go as far as to tell children that their parents do not understand them or their need to acquire a particular product. To the informed parent, it may seem like an onslaught of what they consider to be unreasonable demands, followed by parent guilt because of their child's discontent (Hill, 2011; Sidebotham, 2001). To a child, it may feel like persistent deprivation of their desires – unaware that these desires are informed by external forces that exploit their ability to 'harness their parents' spending power' (Sidebotham, 2001, p. 480).

It is nigh impossible for parents to avoid capitalist-led explicit and implicit messages that convey what makes a 'good' parent. When an underlying social norm is that parents should provide every opportunity for their children's achievement and future success (Nair, 2013), it can be difficult to discriminate between the helpful goods and services and the ones that are just a waste

of time and/or money, or worse still, harmful. For example, are kids' vitamins or special milk products required for health, is one after school activity enough, or should they be involved in an individual sport, a team sport, a second language and something in the music and the arts field? Should they buy products that teach their children to read and count by age two for fear of falling behind before they even commence school? Today's parents are inundated with options, opportunities and choices to navigate. For many parents this comes with a level of guilt and worry about whether they have made the right decisions (Lobstein, 2013; Sanders et al., 2014). Thus, parents feel stressed about whether they are meeting the expectations of what 'good' parents ought to be and do (Nair, 2013; Sidebotham, 2001). Even informed parents who limit their children's participation in the consumer culture feel guilt or concern that their children will be judged harshly or unfairly by their peers or miss out on what other children have, even though they believe it is not in their best interests (Sanders et al., 2014). Are informed parents experiencing downward pressure from neoliberal norms, upward pressure from their children and internal pressures based on the knowledge that acquiescing to demands might be harmful, but remaining resolute in their anti-consumerist behaviours even though this might harm their relationship with their child?

A positive aspect of this predicament, however, is that it provides powerful teaching moments for parents who want to educate their children about the nature of media and marketisation, and more importantly, critical thinking. Like many social problems, part of the solution can be found in education (Daniel & Fiema, 2017). Individuals in the Western world are becoming increasingly aware and critical of the by-products of capitalism on social life (Stark, 2018; Wright, 2016; Wyness, 2006), which opens a space for education and change.

Conclusion

While much of the world faces the ill effects of deprivation, many economically well-off countries face the ill effects of prosperity and abundance. As we, in economically rich countries such as Australia, watch advertisements of children in African countries with distended stomachs from malnutrition and disease, we sit beside our own children with distended bellies from overconsumption. The circumstances in which children are raised in high-income versus low-income countries are clearly incomparable, and it is unfair to make light of the impoverished conditions that some children must endure, but evidence of harm caused to children's health and wellbeing due to facets of modern Western living cannot be ignored. The Western world claims to be enlightened and sells a picture of an idealised golden age of childhood that is free from violence, child labour, slavery and sexual exploitation etcetera. There is condemnation of the manner in which children were exploited during the industrial revolution when used to prop-up economic development, and the unacceptable use of child labour in contemporary cultures where children assume economic responsibilities within the family (James, 1998; Wyness et al., 2004). Yet, it could be argued that children in high-income countries are also used to prop-up the economic position by training them to consume and strive for a quality of life that may well compromise their present and/or future wellbeing. As modern and economically strong nations, high-income nations have the knowledge and prosperity to do better and are, therefore, in no position to take the moral high ground over countries in a less fortunate position.

With insight and economic prosperity, high-income nations are in a position to choose how childhood should be constructed. As stated earlier, children are raised in ways that promote the development of qualities that conform to cultural standards. Have we reached a pivotal juncture in history when we are in a position to decide if we want neoliberalism to set the cultural standard or, based on critical thinking and scientific inquiry, can we choose alternatives that do not impede children's healthy development? Children should be placed squarely in the middle of our obligation of care and protection from all types of harm and that, as trustees of children's best interests and of our future generations, we should defend parents' rights to raise their children without competition from dominant neoliberal forces that potentially cause harm. Or, at the very least, skills in critical reflection should be strengthened as parents enter their new role.

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