

Consumerism as a Source of Structural Violence

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Abstract

Capitalistic consumerism needs an infrastructure in order to continue to manifest itself. Components of that infrastructure include technology and telecommunications, corporate led globalization, the neo-liberal market ideology, world financial institutions, and complacent, or complicit, governments. Most significantly, the other component of this infrastructure is the consumer, and by association, the family and consumer sciences (FCS) profession. The basic premise of this paper is that this entire infrastructure is a key source of structural violence, enabled by consumers and FCS professionals who, knowingly or unknowingly, embrace the ideology of consumerism.

Consumerism . . . promotes structural violence.

Structural violence was present in many forms . . . [including] increasing consumerism.

Consumerism . . . causes a remarkable increase of structural and interpersonal violence.

Consumerism [is one of the] important factors in the creation of violence and oppression.

There are other forms of subtle violence that we need to recognize and address including the violence of consumerism.

Consumerism is . . . directly responsible for violence, the root causes of which are greed, hatred and delusion. [Being] unaware of this structural violence [means we] are responsible for violent conflicts everywhere.

Consumerism . . . contributes significantly to violence among individuals, groups and nations.

As long as consumerism is worshipped in the world, there will always be war and violence.

Consumerism is the root cause of violence in America.

It is universally recognized that . . . consumption problems cause countless violence.

Note: Sources of these statements can be obtained from the author. See e-mail contact above.

Introduction

This collection of quotes is not from the family and consumer sciences (FCS) literature. The quotes are definitely not from the consumer studies literature. They are from the peace and social justice literature. If readers are anything like me, perceiving consumerism as a form of structural violence will be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It is not the way the profession has traditionally viewed or understood the widespread and popular concept of consumerism, central to our field of study. Seeing consumerism as violence turns everything on its head. My hope is that this working paper will lead people out of their comfort zone so they can enter into a collective discussion about consumerism as a source of structural violence.

Consumerism

Consumerism is usually understood to refer to the social movement that seeks to protect the consumer against excesses of business and promote the rights of consumers (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). People in this movement often fight for the rights of consumers who are affected by structural violence (landlord tenant issues, housing discrimination, abuse of elderly consumers, discrimination against women by financial institutions, and children as vulnerable consumers). Although much has been written on consumerism as a social movement that arose as a result of consumer problems caused by the way the market is structured, little has been written in the family and consumer sciences (FCS) field about consumerism as a **source** of structural violence.

For the sake of the argument presented in this working paper, consumerism is viewed as a facet of the ideology of contemporary capitalism. Escalating technological development (automation) plus exponential investment capital accumulation have, for a global minority, shifted the emphasis from skilful work to credit-worthy consumption. The work is now done by automated processes at home in the domestic market and elsewhere in the global free-market via the intensified exploitation of people and their environment. Capitalists need consumers to buy products. To ensure that this facet of capitalism exists, social structures and processes have evolved which support and stimulate acquisitiveness in a specific social culture called the "consumer society" (Jones, 1997).

A consumer society has the following characteristics (drawn from McGregor, 2001). Identities are built largely out of things because *things* have meaning. People measure their lives by money and ownership of things. People are convinced that to consume is the surest route to personal happiness, social status, and national success. Advertising, packaging, and marketing create illusory needs that are deemed real because the "economic" machine has made people feel inferior and inadequate. To keep the economic machine moving, people have to be dissatisfied with what they have, hence, with whom they are. Consequently, the meaning of one's life is located in acquisition, ownership, and consumption.

In a consumer society, market values permeate every aspect of daily lives. Marketplaces are abstract, stripped of culture (except the culture of consumption), of social relations, and of any social-historical context. Consumers are placed at the center of the "good society" as individuals who freely and autonomously pursue choices through rational means, creating a society through the power they exercise in the market. Consequently, in a consumer society, there is a widespread lack of moral discipline, a glorification of greed and material accumulation, an increased breakdown in family and community, a rise of lawlessness and disorder, an ascendancy of racism and bigotry, a rise in the priority of national interests over the welfare of humanity, and an increase in alienation and isolation. Social space is reorganized around leisure and consumption as central social pursuits and as the basis for social relationships. A consumer society needs leisure to be commercialized and the home to be mechanized in order that time and energy are freed up for shopping and producing more things to buy. Social activities and emotions are turned into economic activities through the process of commodification.

In a consumer society, the act of consuming eventually leads to materialism, defined as a culture where material interests are primary and supercede other social goals (Friedman, 1993). Durning (1992) claims that people living in a consumer culture attempt to satisfy social, emotional, and spiritual needs with material things. This materialism eventually co-opts people's physical lives, community, and spirit because it gives a misleading sense of being in control and secure, in the short term.

A consumer society is fast paced, based on round the clock living but people were not biologically designed for this pace. To compensate for the stress, as a quick fix, people believe that all problems have a material or money solution. People use spending and materialism as a way to build a new ego. People try to become new persons by buying products that support their self-image. Displaying all of the goods one has accumulated helps one gain prestige and envy, thereby living out the ideology of conspicuous consumption.

Unfortunately, this practice creates a false, temporary sense of inner peace because the religion of the market (a system of beliefs) co-opts aspects of humanity and spirituality. People eventually begin to think that things are out of whack, that their priorities are mixed up, that their moral center is being lost so . . . they spend more to cover up the fear. To exacerbate this fear, technology has left people isolated with no sense of belonging. It has cocooned them to the extent that they are blinded to their destructive ways. Wisalo (1999) suggests that such destructive consumerism occurs because of humans' insecurity in their hearts and minds. Ironically, people allegedly consume to gain this security. He says that people feel they can become a new person by purchasing those products that support their self-image of whom they are, want to be, and where they want to go. Unfortunately, this approach to becoming a new person, to developing a sense of self, is unsustainable. People "under the influence of consumerism" never feel completely satisfied because owning something cannot help meet the security of heart and mind, the deeper needs of humanity. Constantly spending and accumulating only gives short-term fulfilment and relief from the need to have peace and security in life.

Consumerism is the misplaced belief (myth) that consuming will gratify the individual. In this sense, it is an acceptance of consumption as a way to self-development, self-realization, and self-fulfilment. In a consumer society, an individual's identity is tied to what she or he consumes. People buy more than they need for basic subsistence and are concerned for their self-interest rather than for mutual, communal, or ecological interest. In a consumer society, whatever maximizes individual happiness is considered the best action and that line of thinking gets translated into accumulating goods and using more services (Goodwin, Ackerman & Kiron, 1997). Society has even gone so far as to understand consumerism to be a vehicle for freedom, power, and happiness. It supplements work, religion, and politics as the main mechanism by which social status and distinction are achieved. Although people perceive each of the isolated (a) personal moments of consumption, (b) working within the home, and (c) engaging in cultural endeavors as very private, they are actually very public actions, inherently tied to global economic and political processes.

In the global marketplace, consumerism is also viewed as the pursuit of ever-higher standards of living, thereby justifying global development and capitalism via trade and internationalism of the marketplace. Capitalism needs laborers, money, and markets. Large sections of the world population are excluded in a consumer society, save for the exploitation of their labour and their nation's natural resources to produce consumer goods. Rampant consumerism has led to pollution, hazardous wastes, exhausted resources, irreversible environmental damage, spiritual withdrawal, and an increased gap and growing tension between the haves and have-nots. The loss of biodiversity is paralleled by the loss of cultural diversity via cultural homogenization, leading to the consumer monoculture that feeds the capitalistic machine.

Under the spell of consumerism, few people give thought to whether their consumption habits produce class inequality, alienation, or repressive power, i.e., structural violence. People

are concerned more with the "stuff of life" rather than with "quality of life," least of all the quality of life of those producing the goods they consume. Indeed, consumerism is manifested in chronic purchasing of new goods and services with little attention to their true need, durability, country of origin, working conditions, or environmental consequences of manufacture and disposal ("Why overcoming consumerism," 1997).

To conclude, capitalistic consumerism needs an infrastructure in order to continue to manifest itself. Components of that infrastructure include technology and telecommunications, corporate-led globalization, the neo-liberal market ideology, world financial institutions, and complacent, or complicit, governments. Most significantly, the other component of this infrastructure is the consumer, and by association, the family and consumer science profession. **The basic premise of this paper is that this entire infrastructure is a key source of structural violence, enabled by consumers who, knowingly or unknowingly, embrace the ideology of consumerism.**

Consumerism as Structural Violence

Johan Galtung (1969) first coined the term structural violence intending it to refer to the presence of justice (positive peace) to balance the prevailing focus on negative peace, the absence of war and violence. Whereas direct violence and war are very visible, structural violence is almost invisible, embedded in ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions, and regular experience. Because they are longstanding, structural inequities usually seem ordinary, the way things are and always have been done. Worse yet, even those who are victims of structural violence often do not see the systematic ways in which their plight is choreographed by unequal and unfair distribution of society's resources or by human constraint caused by economic and political structures. Unequal access to resources, political power, education, health care, or legal standing are all forms of structural violence (Winter & Leighton, 1999). Structural violence can also occur in a society if institutions and policies are designed in such a way that barriers result in lack of adequate food, housing, health, safe and just working conditions, education, economic security, clothing, and family relationships. People affected by structural violence tend to live a life of oppression, exclusion, exploitation, marginalization, collective humiliation, stigmatization, repression, inequities, and lack of opportunities due to no fault of their own, *per se*. The people most affected by structural violence are women, children, and elders; those from different ethnic, racial, and religious groups; and sexual orientation.

Those adversely affected by structural violence are not involved in direct conflict that is readily identifiable. Because they, and others, may not comprehend the origin of the conflict, they feel they are to blame, or are blamed, for their own life conditions. This perception is readily escalated because people's perceptual and cognitive processes normally divide people into in-groups and out-groups. Those outside "our group" lie outside our scope of interest and justice. They are invisible. Injustice that would be instantaneously confronted if it occurred to someone in "our group" is barely noticed if it occurs to strangers or those who are invisible and irrelevant. Those who fall outside "our group" are easily morally excluded and become demeaned or invisible, so we do not have to acknowledge the injustice they suffer (Winter & Leighton, 1999). "Consumerism is the drug that causes people to fall into moral sleep and remain silent on all kinds of public matters. As long as their little world of peace and relative prosperity is not disturbed, they are happy not to get involved. It is against this background of consumer complacency that all kinds of moral relaxation can arise A consumer society is one that is prepared to sacrifice its ethics on the altar of the material 'feel-good' factor" (Benton, 1998).

Persons living in a consumer society live a comfortable life at the expense of impoverished labourers and fragile ecosystems in other countries. Too often, they conclude that they must arm themselves to protect their commodities and the ongoing access to them. This position justifies war and violence (Cejka, 2003). The “veil of consumerism” enables them to overlook the connections between consumerism and oppressive regimes (governments, world financial institutions, and transnational corporations) that violate human rights, increase drug trade, and boost military spending (Sankofa, 2003). This disregard is possible because consumerism accentuates and accelerates human fragmentation, isolation, and exclusion for the profit of the few, contributing significantly to violence (Board of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, 1994). Society has ignored the “new slavery” and the resultant disposable people through ignoring the implications of consumption decisions on third world citizens, the next generation, and those not yet born (Sankofa).

From yet another perspective, McGregor (2001) suggests that consumerism is also a form of slavery to those doing the consuming. She tantalizes us with the ideas that people behave as they do in a consumer society because they 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 what it means to live in a consumer society, they actually contribute to their own oppression (slaves of the market and capitalism) as well as the oppression of others who make the goods and of the natural ecosystem. Strong and unsustainable consumption patterns have developed and have been unchallenged over a long period of time to the point that consumerism and structural violence represent dominant forces in human social interaction, and these forces are transforming human life in powerful and destructive ways (Santi Pracha Dammha Institute, 2001).

Consumerism has caused a visible and dramatic increase in human kind’s obsession with possessions and in the identification of one’s person with what one owns. The trend has significantly grown over the last century and with it the violence it entails (Sols, 2002). Witness the killing of youth by youth for brand name running shoes or jackets. Witness the violence present in advertisements, video games, music, videos, and children’s programming on television. Witness the not so silent violence in the home due to dual income and single parents working to meet increasing costs of living. Witness the latch key kids, underfunded day care, and escalating violence in schools. These are symptoms of violence in a society structured around consumerism. Carter (1999) agrees and advances the idea that the root causes of youth violence can be partially blamed on the focus society places on consumerism.

We teach children capitalistic consumerism, yet tell them nothing about the lives of the workers who slave to assemble designer clothing, toys, and electronics; nor the animals that suffered to create fashion or food; nor the environmental impact of the trash we create. And, by no means do we tell them that these situations are inextricably linked (Wells, 2000). Fox (2001) asks, “Have we mourned and asked forgiveness for the collective acts of necrophilia including slavery and genocide to native peoples that launched our economic success as a nation? Do we take responsibility for the envy we arouse when we put consumerism and the profits of multinational corporations above the human values of just wage, environmental conservation, and the celebration of life? Have we even come close to addressing the huge gulf between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in our culture and our species?”

The Facts Tell the Story of Consumerism as Structural Violence

Consumerism and violence are two indications that we live in a capitalist, or free

enterprise system that gives permission, in theory at least, to move "up" and leave the rest behind. The basic capitalism of our society gives permission to ignore the inequalities without feeling guilt. It gives permission to look beyond the facts that there are some citizens with a great deal of money, and some with very little (Judson, 1999).

Consider these statistics as evidence of consumerism as structural violence, **remembering that** structural violence exists when institutions and policies are designed in such a way that barriers in society result in lack of adequate food, housing, health, safe and just working conditions, education, economic security, clothing, and family relationships. People affected by structural violence tend to live a life of oppression, exclusion, exploitation, marginalization, collective humiliation, stigmatization, repression, inequities, and lack of opportunities due to no fault of their own, per se. The people most affected by structural violence are women, children, and elders; those from different ethnic, racial, and religious groups; and sexual orientation:

- ◆ Nike made \$9 billion in sales. After paying its bills, it had a \$796 million profit. Over half a million people in the world work for Nike and they make, on average, \$800.00 U.S. per year (\$40 million all together).
- ◆ In 1995, the workers in a Gap factory earned 27¢ to sew a shirt that we buy for \$34.00.
- ◆ Garment workers in El Salvador earn \$7.20 a day but it costs them \$15.38 per day for rent, 3 meagre meals, transportation to work, and child care (does not include utilities, health, education).
- ◆ In the Megatex factory in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where several lines of clothing are made for Disney, workers earn \$2.15 a day while their average daily expenses are \$6.12. At this wage, the workers are trapped.
- ◆ 37% of all clothes/apparel sold in Canada are made in China where they are forbidden from organizing to improve working conditions (sweatshops, child labour, prison labour).
- ◆ 80% of all the products we buy are made by women (on average aged 12-14).
- ◆ We would need four earths if everyone on earth lived the western lifestyle.
- ◆ In 1997, the UN Conference on Trade and Development reported that wages for unskilled workers had dropped by 20 to 30 percent in developing countries that had liberalized trade laws to attract manufacturing business from developed countries.
- ◆ The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that more than half of the 22,000 sewing shops in the U.S. violate minimum wage and overtime laws, and other government surveys indicate that 75 percent of U.S. garment manufacturers violate safety and health laws.
- ◆ A men's shirt retailing for \$32 in the U.S. costs \$4.74 to produce in the free-trade zones in Mexico, where sweatshops are prevalent. Of that amount, 52 cents goes to production workers and another 52 cents to supervisors. That leaves close to 80% for the corporation and retailer.
- ◆ Eight cents (8¢) of each \$20.00 for a Gap cap goes to workers, who earn approximately \$40 after 56 hours of work, in violation of Dominican law.
- ◆ The Fisher family, founders and executives of the Gap, Banana Republic, and Old Navy clothing chains, purchased 230,000 acres of forest land in Mendocino

County, California, and have been logging old-growth redwoods, destroying struggling Coho salmon fisheries, wiping out precious wildlife habitat, and polluting public drinking water.

- ◆ Since December 1999, Wal-Mart Canada imported almost 70 tons of garments from Burma. Despite Wal-Mart claims that it broke its Burma connection in January 2000, Wal-Mart was identified in a Thai newspaper as buying garments from a factory owned by Burmese drug thug. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has condemned Burma for "widespread and systematic" violations of the prohibition on the use of forced labor. Burma has been censured for allowing the modern-day practice of slavery.
- ◆ Based on filings that Wal-Mart made to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, women are 72 percent of the company's sales staff but only one-third of them make it into management. Wal-Mart also admitted to discriminating against job applicants with disabilities.

Note: Sources of these statistics can be obtained from the author. See e-mail contact at the beginning of the article.

“Learning about structural violence may be discouraging, overwhelming, or maddening, but [we are] encouraged to step beyond guilt and anger and begin to think about how to reduce structural violence” (Winter & Leighton, 1999, p. 3), in this case how to mitigate the impact of living in a consumer society. “As we rethink the causes of conflict and violence worldwide, we are challenged to deeply transform excessively consumerist lifestyles that fuel policies and structures of inequity and human rights violations” (Toh, 2001, p. 1). One way to meet this challenge is to reflect more deeply on how family and consumer sciences conceptualizes consumerism and on whether its members are part of the problem or part of the solution to ending structural violence in the marketplace.

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