



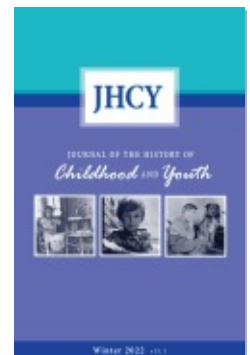
PROJECT MUSE®

*The Moral Project of Childhood: Motherhood, Material Life,
and Early Children's Consumer Culture* by Daniel Thomas Cook
(review)

Maureen Mauk, Helle Strandgaard Jensen, Rebekah Willett, Natalie
Coulter

The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth, Volume 15,
Number 1, Winter 2022, pp. 149-157 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2022.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/846864>

🔗 *For content related to this article*
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=846864

Book Reviews

The Moral Project of Childhood: Motherhood, Material Life, and Early Children's Consumer Culture.

By Daniel Thomas Cook.

New York: New York University Press, 2020. x + 256 pp. Paper \$30.00, cloth \$89.00.

This is an extended review that emanated out of a reading club, which developed around this book as a result of pandemic restrictions and new possibilities. The approach was to reflect upon each chapter from the perspective of what Cook's work adds to each of the participants' own narrow fields. This process allowed the group to slowly and purposefully consider the complex and nuanced ways that childhoods are embedded in and contribute to consumer culture. Daniel Cook is an important figure in childhood studies. In perusing Cook's vast publication record, there is evidence of his works forging pathways in the field and shaping theory connected with the economic, sociological, and cultural tensions of childhood. As the author of *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (2004, Duke University Press), Cook's scholarship allowed for a reimagining of the consumer market surrounding the child. His latest book, *The Moral Project of Childhood: Motherhood, Material Life, and Early Children's Consumer Culture* was released at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when so much that we assume to be natural and flowing in childhood, academia, and life in general came to a sudden halt.

Around the same time that this book was released, a major conference on childhood studies was cancelled due to the pandemic. Out of a desire to connect with our fellow childhood studies colleagues, the four authors of this review decided to read Cook's book together as a form of "slow scholarship," reading each chapter slowly and attentively followed by a discussion meeting every few weeks on each chapter while jokingly calling our group the "Cook Book Club." With each month that passed during the pandemic, our book club allowed us to pursue joint interests and created a space to discuss and relate Cook's research to our own work. In our final meeting, we invited Dan Cook to join us. This book review is unique in that it carries the thoughts relative to four reviewers, each working from a different space of scholarship, in

three different countries, and at various stages of our academic careers. While the pandemic created isolation within our own university contexts and also cancelled conferences, speaking opportunities, and a proper launch of Cook's monograph, it ironically generated the freedom and space to amply connect and relate together over Cook's work, his themes, and his approach. In this review, Helle Strandgaard Jensen begins by explaining the takeaways of this important book from her perspective as a contemporary cultural historian, reviewing the introduction and Chapter 1. Maureen Mauk, studying media and culture as it relates to parents, reviews Chapter 2 and points to how Cook's methodology might avail young scholars. Rebekah Willett reviews Chapters 3 and 5 from her childhood studies and education perspective. And Natalie Coulter examines Chapter 4 from the perspective of her work on the ecologies of children's media and negotiations of the child within the marketplace. Following these chapter reviews, we offer a reflection of the relevance of the book to our specific fields of interest.

1. OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In his book, Cook tracks the history of children's relationship to market considerations, and the economy more generally, to demonstrate how childhood is a contested site that develops in relation to consumption. In addition to childhood studies' and childhood history's central analytical question of "what a child is" in different contexts, he also asks "*when* is a child?" (5) In doing so, he points to the importance of considering the particular circumstances for which children and childhood are being defined. For Cook, this relates to consumption—not only the consumption of particular goods, but also the restriction or absence of consumption—as part of a moral project in which the (in)appropriate relation between childhood and the market economy has been defined. Walking the fine line differentiating a healthy or undesirable relation between these two entities has been mothers' responsibility, Cook says, and this is why they are his focus. Confining his analysis to a white, middle-class northeastern US context, he tries to rewind the historiography's typical narrative of a Calvinist/Puritan idea of childhood that was replaced by a Victorian sentimental and indulgent consumer culture (6). However, he aims to not so much correct historiographical shortcomings; rather, this is a means to point out how the idea of the child and its relation to consumption is an arena where moral questions of personhood, self, and responsibility are negotiated and (re) defined (7). Childhood in this sense is to Cook not something outside or above struggles over moral concerns—it is where these take place. Linking this idea to

panics about materialism or media consumption, the book ties in with ideas of other works that use the cultural history of childhood to point out childhood's centrality in definitions of morally acceptable behavior (Buckingham 2011; Bak 2020; Jensen 2017). But the timeframe of Cook's book, which goes back as far as the 1830s, offers new historical trajectories to challenge the notions of childhood innocence and ideals of a "precapitalist child" (in both a historical and a biological sense). With his historical analysis, Cook challenges the implicit idea of a "precapitalist" child and "uncommodified childhood," which he finds in sociology, pointing to work by Sharon Hays, Arlie Hochschild, and Vivian Zelizer as places where these ideas exist. Cook recasts the narrative of the child turning from laborer to consumer, offering a history of change in personhood where subjectivity is at the forefront.

Cook's primary sources are women's periodical magazines from the 1830s to the 1930s. This choice underscores Cook's commitment to uncover the crucial role in which mothers have been cast in the moral project of childhood consumer culture, as these magazines have been written mainly from women and mothers to women and mothers, even if they increasingly drew upon theories and advice from (male) experts. He treats these sources as Andersonian imaginative communities producing the "what" and "when" of children in tandem with motherhood. As such, it is also the endlessly redefined mother(hoods) and child(hoods) performed in writing and images in these magazines that interest Cook.

Chapter 1 closely relates to Cook's earlier work about the missing child in consumer culture (Cook 2008). It does not, however, treat this as a theoretical question, but studies Evangelical mothering to historicize a problem in Max Weber's writings regarding the development of the Protestant ethic—namely, Weber ignored the role of women, mothers, and children. The chapter examines *The Mother's Magazine* published between 1833 and 1848 in "the religiously viscous environment of Utica, New York" for an audience of white Christian mothers (32). It presents the idea that a child's character was the responsibility of the mother, and because of children's malleability, a mother's job was an intense moral project not dissimilar to Sharon Hays's idea of intensive mothering, which she has confined to a post-WWII culture. Cook neatly demonstrates how every act that mothers performed—for instance, by giving or not giving a child a specific toy—was seen as teaching the child to relate to the world in a particular way emotionally and morally. This, he points out, is a specific view of the child-mother relationship that later forms a central element of the moral project of the child consumer.

Chapter 2 focuses on taste, consumption, and parenting. Cook found a concentrated discursive effort by periodicals such as *Godey's Lady's Book* towards a childhood where social status and a child's potential for social standing converged in the "world of goods"—the conspicuous consumption and act of owning quality material objects that could contribute to their moral well-being (58). At the root of this subtle, soft pedagogy, with its focus on crafting the malleable child, is the mother. Mothers were implicated as the brokers between an intertwined marketplace of aesthetic and educational goods, furnishing trappings and effects to help build the materiality of the domestic as a refuge from the corrosiveness of life outside the home (55). Mothers were the influencers, the tastemakers, the cultivators of a child's refinement, which, in Cook's findings, not only built a child's moral and productive purpose within society—their "interiority," as Cook puts it—but exposed the character and cultivation of the parent herself (18, 79). Mothers had to ensure that children not only had the right goods, be it dress, food, amusements, and bedroom décor, but had the right relationship with the marketplace itself (53). This chapter also includes one of Cook's few references to race. While Cook limits his study to magazines that were clearly written for, about, and from the perspective of white privileged mothers, there are opportunities to put this research into context with a dialogue about the racialized and classed assumptions of white middle-class constructions of childhood during this era (56). In Cook's research, notions of taste and childhood innocence surrounding consumption more specifically refer to notions about *white* childhood, a *white* notion of innocence and malleability.

Chapter 3 is attentive to the notion of discipline or, more precisely, the change toward a more child-centered approach to discipline that accompanied shifts in understandings of children and childhood. The Victorian view of the child as an "active, knowing, agentive being" represented a significant move away from the Calvinist and Puritan conceptions of the child as "evil at birth" and adopted Locke's argument that children can be directed and molded. In discussing discipline of children, Cook finds that women's magazines devoted pages to helping mothers in a variety of ways. This included understanding child development and welfare, encouraging mothers to take the child's perspective and to empathize with the child, considering the long-term effects of corporal punishment, as well as to "appeal to the mind" of the child as a rational being. Equally disparaging of rewards-based discipline, Cook details the Victorian argument that rewards bestowed on children encouraged selfishness and pride and eventually led to children who were "unappreciative of the

world." Mothers' role, therefore, was crucial in responding to and directing children, ordering discipline in ways that shaped the child, and developing an approach that provided both discipline and space for the child to be happy.

Chapter 4 considers the ways in which taste, pleasure, and desire for things became a tool to produce proper childhoods. Throughout the book, Cook details how the Victorian child was positioned as being malleable, with the mother's job being the moral project of producing the right kind of child. In this chapter, Cook draws upon his past scholarship (2011, 2019) in the field of children's consumer culture, which explores how the child is defined by the commercial epistemologies of the marketplace. But these prior studies did not really address how this came to be possible. In Chapter 4, Cook begins by contending that it was in the Victorian era that physical objects and the possession of material goods became seen as a vehicle to *produce* proper childhoods, as opposed to *being* corruptive forces. In Cook's argument, because the material was a site of taste, desire, and pleasure, and since the child is malleable, it was a mother's moral project to mold a child's "proper" tastes and desires. Cook suggests that this moral project was met with the "increasing hegemonic presence of the child's subjectivity" (110). The Victorian mother could only manipulate and mold the child's taste and desires, which were naturalized components of a child's subjectivity. In order to effectively do this, a mother had to know the child's natural tastes and desires. Thus, the child's rights formed the crux of material life, with taste and desire as central to childhood subjectivity.

Chapter 5 directly addresses children's consumer culture by considering pleasure, subjectivity, and authority. Middle-class mothers' role in balancing "external influence and child subjectivity" and providing the appropriate environment for children framed an understanding of early consumer culture for children. The moral project of middle-class childhood involved play with certain materials—materials that allowed for play to be both didactic and pleasurable. Again, a child-centered approach was viewed as necessary for success in this moral project, and children's malleability made the objects surrounding children all the more important. Children needed to learn about consumer culture through their engagements. Learning about taste, commercialism, and even media literacy connected with advertising were all part of the role of consumer culture in Victorian homes. Importantly, discourse concerning children's rights, children's voices, and children's subjectivities as authoritative were a key influence in these conversations, particularly via marketers. The mothers' role, then, was to know and understand the interests of the child, to

acknowledge children's subjectivity, and to provide the "appropriate" avenues for self-expression.

2. DISCUSSION

At the start of the book, Cook writes that it "is best read front to back, as each chapter builds on the insights and concepts of the preceding one" (21). The "slow scholarship" of the book club, in which we read one or two chapters per month, allowed us to work through the whole book and incorporate Cook's larger thesis into our own work, unlike the common practice each of us recognized of reading segments of scholarly works for just-in-time references to support our writing. One of the strengths of this book is the way it "speaks" to different fields and subfields of children's studies. To illustrate this, in this second part of the review, we share how the work has helped each of us advance our particular areas of scholarship.

Maureen Mauk: As a media scholar studying the industry and its history as it relates to regulation and the positioning of parents and responsibility in children's media consumption, Cook's research methods offer value toward my own approach as he focuses on clusters of conversations from historical public discourse to provide insight into the co-construction of motherhood and childhood. His work on taste-making in the home by mothers connects meaningfully to my own work examining maternal responsibility for a child's moral architecture a century later, as it relates to children's media consumption. Cook's work allows me to connect my research to a path that has been trodden long before television and digital media, as I consider the tensions and implications of parents as they take responsibility not only for their child's well-being but also for their relationship to the media. His research demonstrates how mothers have carried these types of responsibilities, ensuring that children have the "appropriate disposition toward things and the world of things" (53) throughout history, including nineteenth-century America.

Helle Strandgaard Jensen: For me, as a historian, Cook's dual interest in simultaneously historicizing and theorizing the phenomenon of early childhood consumer culture contains a dilemma. The book is, on the one hand, placed squarely in the intersecting histories of childhood, motherhood, and consumption, contributing to each of the three in different ways. On the other hand, Cook tells us that he is not doing "proper history" (14), but aligns with Philip Adams in that he sees no purpose in separating history and sociology. I agree that this argument strengthens the idea of history as an analytical and interpretive academic field (rather than just some nonsense about unearthing facts). However, the general claims sometimes made in sociology, and also by Cook,

do at times taste a little of the universality claimed in psychology and medicine that Cook wants to challenge. For instance, one such claim is made in the book's introduction stating, "children and childhood demand a ceaseless attention, a perpetual monitoring, largely due to the uncertainties they are said to imply and embody" (1). But as the general claims might be too "sociological" for some historians, they are also the book's strength. Unlike historical analyses that can become too tedious and procedural, not daring to venture from the specificities of a given period and time, Cook shows us why a long history of children's consumer culture is a beneficial way to understand contemporary issues. With great conviction, he demonstrates how changing historical instantiations of the "moral architecture" of childhood are related to current discussions about childhood, parental responsibilities, and consumer culture. The book hereby works as a reflective backdrop that can help readers to understand the moral implications at stake when discussing and practicing consumption in relation to children.

Rebekah Willett: My recent scholarship focuses on parenting and screen media. What does a book on Victorian mothers have to do with our understanding of discourse connected with children's screen time? A lot, as it happens. In my research, I have analyzed ways parents discursively construct their decisions about children's screen media use as based in scientific research and as reflections of their own "moral projects" of child-rearing. Cook's book illuminates the complex processes that contribute to these assumptions that are embedded in parents' articulations of their decisions regarding family media practices. Aligning with Cook's findings about Victorian motherhood, parents currently position pseudo-scientific arguments that contribute to their parenting practices as neutral findings about children. They see their role in providing access to and regulation of screen media as part the pedagogy of family life, and they see children as malleable and therefore susceptible to the risks associated with screen media consumption. Importantly, parents, and particularly mothers, indicate their constant battle to enforce routines such as limits on screen time, because, as Cook writes, "Malleability does not take a holiday, and training in taste, simplicity, discipline, and governance likewise presents itself as ongoing and perpetually demanding" (115). Similar to Cook's thesis, a productive analysis of parenting in relation to children's screen media consumption takes account of discourses regarding childhood's malleability, the role of mothers as accountable for the "outcomes" of their children, and an account of children's agency.

Natalie Coulter: As a scholar interested in the intersections between children and consumer culture, Cook's works have always figured prominently in my

research, and this book is no exception. Cook's brilliance is in that he ties the development of capitalism and the logics of capital to changing notions of childhood by illuminating the deep connections between commercial epistemologies and childhood subjectivities. Cook explicitly states in *The Moral Project of Childhood* that modern childhood is made possible by consumer culture, not in spite of it (9). In order to have the "right" kind of child according to the moral standards of middle-class white families, mothers were to curate the material needs of the child. Framing the child as malleable, Cook argues, gives a "kind of cultural permission for market actors to speak to it, through it, and on its behalf" (137). This book is solidly set in the Victorian era, but for me, looking back on this time with such detail allows for insight into the current moment of digital capitalism by asking how the child is a moral project in the context of digital spaces. Cook's argument—that the malleable child legitimizes the commercial within childhood spaces—can entice us to ask if and how today's childhood is "born of" (9) contemporary digital capitalism and, in this context, continue to ask what is the moral project of childhood today.

As Cook's own PhD advisor, Brian Sutton-Smith, once told him, in one's academic career, you'll likely have one big idea or question that you keep coming back to, but it can take a career to figure out that question. This book, according to Cook, was truly a lifelong project, years in the making, directing him toward the big question. Readers of Cook's other works will recognize Cook's thesis throughout the book, stated clearly in the introduction: "children have not only been born *into* a consumer culture . . . modern childhood, in a sense, continues to be born *of* it" (9). With this thesis, Cook illustrates the relevance of his work to any discipline that addresses childhoods. However, for us as scholars, it was the slow reading of Cook's book that assisted our recognition of the ways that childhoods are embedded in and contribute to consumer culture. We look forward to seeing the how other scholars take up Cook's thesis to move their fields forward.

REFERENCES

- Bak, Meredith. *Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020.
- Buckingham, David. *The Material Child: Growing Up in Consumer Culture*. Cambridge: Polity, 2011.
- Cook, Daniel Thomas. *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Cook, Daniel Thomas. "The Missing Child in Consumption Theory." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2 (2008): 219–43.

Cook, Daniel Thomas. "Leveraging the Child's Perspective: Commercial Epistemologies of Children's Consumption." In *Inside Marketing*, edited by Detlev Zwick and Julian Kayla, 257–68. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Cook, Daniel Thomas. "Children's Market Researchers as Moral Brokers." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 12, no. 1 (2019): 17–82.

Jensen, Helle Strandgaard. *From Superman to Social Realism: Children's Media and Scandinavian Childhood*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017.

Maureen Mauk
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Helle Strandgaard Jensen
Aarhus University

Rebekah Willett
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Natalie Coulter
York University, Canada

Deconstructing Dolls: Girlhoods and the Meanings of Play.

Edited by Miriam Forman-Brunell.

New York: Berghahn, 2021. xii + 182 pp. Paper \$27.95/£22.95, cloth \$120/£89.00.

Since at least the Enlightenment, intellectuals have queried the importance of doll play to girls. In the late twentieth century, research accelerated as feminists questioned the role of dolls, especially Barbie, in the development of gender identity and expression. Girls' studies blossomed in the twenty-first century, gaining an academic venue, *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, in 2008, and an outpouring of sophisticated scholarship followed. Doll studies use interdisciplinary methods, many informed by critical race theory and feminist epistemologies, to understand the complex relationship between girlhood and doll play. *Deconstructing Dolls* makes available to a broad audience a selection of these innovative articles, most of which appeared in *Girlhood Studies'* 2012 special issue. The volume, edited by doll studies' scholar