The Children's Birthday Party: a Study of Mothers As Socialization Agents

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ABSTRACT - Recently, studies of symbolic consumption have examined how consumers acquire and use goods in ritual contexts. Yet the processes involved as consumers learn to participate in these contexts have been virtually ignored. Using Rook's (1985) framework for understanding consumption rituals, this paper employs interpretive methodology to examine how mothers act as socialization agents, and teach their children to participate in various aspects of the birthday party. Our findings suggest mothers use ritual artifacts, scripts, performance roles and the ritual audience to teach children both general knowledge and values, and specific behaviors necessary for successful participation in this ritual. Research implications are discussed.

METHOD
To capture a phenomenological understanding of children’s birthday parties, we recruited thirteen mothers of children ages three to five who were enrolled at a daycare center affiliated with a state university in the Midwest. Interviews were conducted between June and August, 1992. All informants were middle-class and employed. Most were Caucasian and married, and most had had two children.

Interviews were conducted by two of the authors, and by an undergraduate trained in qualitative interviewing techniques while participating in an intensive research program. Each mother was interviewed once, then provided with a projective instrument to complete at home.

Mothers were asked to react to three sets of projective stimuli or drawings of children engaged in activities at birthday parties. These included drawings of: (1) children playing “Pin-the-Tail on the Donkey”; (2) a child opening a birthday present; and (3) an adult of undiscernible gender presenting a birthday cake to children at a table. Mothers also completed a series of sentence stems, such as “Children’s birthday parties are...” and “The older I get, children’s birthday parties...” Finally, mothers were asked to describe a dream they might have had about their child’s birthday party.

Interviews were conducted at either the childcare center or at the mother’s place of employment. We followed a structured interview schedule such as that recommended by McCracken (1988), but encouraged our informants to discuss any birthday-related topics they desired. Interviews typically lasted from between 45 minutes to one hour. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, yielding over 150 pages of text. In interpreting this material, we employed the “constant comparative” method discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). That is, we read, reread and interpreted the text until we reached a common understanding of what we believed it to represent. In addition, the second author was not involved in data collection, and therefore acted as an external auditor for interpretation, thus enhancing the validity of the interpretation. In the following sections, informant names have been changed to assure their anonymity.

This paper does not address the issue of gender differences in socialization among participants. Researchers interested in such questions should consult a recent study by Otnes and McGrath (1994), which specifically examines gender differences in the ritual socialization of children’s birthday parties.

Socialization Through Ritual Artifacts

Admittedly, it is difficult to discuss ritual artifacts separately from the ritual scripts that govern their use. We have approached this problem by discussing “themed” artifacts with no particular scripts associated with them below, and by discussing artifacts with highly prescribed uses in the next section.

The Theme As Participatory Planning Tool. While “themed” parties may carry negative connotations of commercialization, our mothers used themed decorations, party favors, and cake for two primary purposes: 1) to instruct children how to plan parties; and 2) to indicate approval of disapproval of commercial elements aimed at mothers. Among the themes mentioned were Barbie, Beauty and the Beast, Ninja Turtles, and “pirates.” That mothers use artifacts for socialization is not surprising, given that “such artifacts often communicate specific symbolic messages that are integral to the meaning of the total experience” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, quoted in Rook 1985, p. 253).

Mothers made theme planning a learning experience by discussing potential themes with their children and taking them shopping for artifacts. For example, although Christine paid to have her son’s party at a children’s gym, he selected the superhero motif and the flavor and design of the cake. Likewise, Pam described her child’s role in planning:

“She was involved in choosing some of the little prizes and the cake. We took her with us when we went to the store...that has a bakery and they make these birthday cakes on various themes...she was allowed to choose which one...she chose Cinderella.”

In Mary’s case, her son not only selected the theme, but actively helped her to create it:

“He was pretty involved, at this age...he knew what he wanted on his cake...I knew that if I just went and got something and he knew how he wanted it, it just did not work. So we did a lot together.”

The Theme as Opportunity for Approval/Disapproval. Mothers also often indicated the parameters of appropriate theme choices by approving or disapproving their child’s selection. Most themes appeared to be “learned” by the children from movies or television, and less from mothers’ own suggestions. Thus, it appeared important that mothers placed “boundaries” on their children’s choices. Christine said her daughter “had seen [101 Dalmatians]...in the movie theater the year before, and then she knew she was gonna get the video...Because I liked it. And we figured out games [for the party] that were all dog-related.” When mothers did not agree with their child’s theme selection, they pointed this fact out to the child. For example, despite the popularity of “Ninja Turtles” in our culture, this theme was mentioned by at least three informants as one of which they disapproved. Darlene stated pointedly: “We don’t encourage [Jake] to be into Ninja Turtles...In fact, we discourage him.” When her son wanted to employ that theme for his third birthday party, “I was fighting it all the way...I think I gave him some other options. I think they are too aggressive.”

Likewise, Mary told how she used the absence of “commercial” themes at her son’s parties to teach him other values. When asked if parties were too commercialized, she replied:

“It is not so much the money, but the values I have about it and people have different values and that is fine, but I have to explain to Carl that we have decided to do it this way because we think birthdays are very special, but we celebrate them differently than other people...that’s what we think is important that is the lesson we try to show (emphasis added).”

In summary, the party “theme” appeared to be a vehicle that helped mothers teach children how to plan for parties, as well as provide mothers with an opportunity to voice their approval or disapproval of certain commercial elements aimed at children.

Socialization Through Ritual Scripts

Everyone’s a Winner in This Game. Traditionally, games at birthday parties represented a “symbolic wiping out of the past year and the starting of the new year ahead.” Certain games that exemplified skill or strength were thus employed as a sort of “growth chart” to “show how much progress the birthday child had made in the past year” (Rinkoff 1967, p. 5). These games were thus used to measure individual growth and progress of the child from year to year. Games or activities were mentioned as important elements of birthday parties by eleven mothers.

As Lisa explained, “you need some games, so that kids can be active, you can’t really have them just sit down the whole time.”

Our informants appeared apprehensive about introducing competitive games that stressed “child against child” and could result in hurt feelings. Pam described the difficulty of this scenario in her response to the “Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Donkey” projective picture and offered a way to re-create the conventional script, which calls for only one “winner”:

“The mom and dad nervously try to patch up some of the hurt feelings by ensuring each child a ‘prize.’ They...”
When asked what kinds of activities she would plan, Diane responded, "Outdoor games...something where everybody wins." In fact, she planned a treasure hunt where: "They all got in like one big cohort, and they all helped each other...It was really nice, they really liked it, and everybody got a prize at the end."

In this way, our informants seem to encourage their children to participate in games for the intangible feelings of "fun" and "self-confidence," rather than for material benefits. Barb related how she handled the situation: "It's difficult to select only one 'winner,' therefore, it's a good idea for everyone to receive a prize or party favor at the end of the party."

By downplaying competitiveness, mothers also help eliminate children's anxiety at birthday parties. For not only are the mom and dad "nervous," but as Diane noted: "The children are...a little anxious about who is going to win, until it is explained to them that everyone gets a prize." By including the "participating is winning" script, mothers attempt to instill good sportsmanship in children, to alleviate competitiveness within this ritual context, and to teach children that not all games have just one winner.

Cake Presentation and Learning to Feel Special. Cake presentation is the most widely recognized ritual script enacted at the birthday party, for this is the time when the spotlight is on the birthday child (Kraus 1983; Wolfsohn 1979). Indeed, for many children "the cake is the party" (Wolfsohn 1979, p.88). According to Carla, "If you say birthday, [her son] talks about what flavor." Although the cake itself might not be the nutritious food mothers generally advocate for their children, cake was specifically mentioned more than 60 times, as the single most common required element for a successful birthday party. Other standard elements of the cake presentation script (e.g., blowing out the candles; the wish and singing the birthday song were all mentioned by our informants.

In terms of socializing children via cake presentation, mothers again often emphasized the intangible rewards of feeling special for the birthday boy or girl. Natalie recounted: "There has to be some point, for almost any child...where that child feels they are the center of the birthday universe...where you bring the cake." This action has the effect of helping the birthday child realize he or she has been "singularized," and that the ritual is not just a cartoonish event, but is truly for him or her (Handelman and Handelman 1991; Otnes and McGrath 1994).

Therefore, this ritual script dictates this is the "child's day," in which "he can eat what he wants, he can do what he wants, if he wants cake in the morning, he just knows that one day of the year he can do what he feels like doing. I guess we all need a day like that," commented Mary and Natalie also described the maternal benefits of singularization: "It's the one time you can indulge your child and nobody will yell at you for it." For our society, highly permissive child-rearing practices are not considered good parenting, and may lead to undesirable behaviors (Baumrind 1971; Maccoby & Martin 1983).

The cake presentation therefore becomes a symbol of love and indulgence that mothers use to show the child that he or she is special. But it also teaches children that particular foods are reserved for special occasions. As Natalie wrote in her projective exercise: "The cake is a two layer, double fudge with chocolate icing, his favorite. It's a special deal because his folks don't have sugar in the house much." Likewise, Christine, said: "the mother has purchased much too large of a cake. The children are excited to see the beautiful cake."

Gifts As Lessons In Graciousness. While mothers will "spotlight" their children with cake, they are somewhat wary when it comes to the gift-opening script. Materialism and selfishness are viewed as two vices in our culture, and our informants worried about their children expressing egocentrism. When describing what she liked best about birthday parties, Mary said: "When it gets, gimme, gimme, gimme and open up the next thing and not appreciating what you got...I guess I dislike the focus on the material stuff." Similarly, a dream party for Paula would involve "a lot less emphasis on presents. If we could do almost without the presents, I would be happiest. Because I think it encourages greed."

While many children enjoy unwrapping gifts (Otnes and McGrath 1994), mothers believe gift-giving scripts should teach the child how to accept gifts as well. According to Paula, the child should, "learn how to feel special, how to allow themselves to be given to, and take it gracefully." In one projective description, one informant explained the difficulty in imparting this lesson: "Hopefully Mom and Dad can explain that the gift was meant to celebrate completing another year of growth and achievement and not just as a way to collect loot."

Parents are often nervous about their child's reaction to gifts, however, as demonstrated by Christine's story:

I'm petrified they are going to say something like, 'Hey, I already have this.' My eight-year-old would never do this because he knows I'll take all his toys and give them to the Salvation Army if I find out...With the four-year-old, I worry...[but] his last party this little boy brought this koala bear and I thought it was the coolest thing and as he opened it, I thought, 'He is going to say that I'm too old to play with stuffed animals,' but he didn't...and I felt a lot of stress...because kids are all watching as you open your present and they all want the kids to be thoroughly thrilled with your present.

Sherry, et al. (1993) observe that many recounts of failed gift exchanges were accompanied by comments that indicate disappointment or resentment, and by facial expressions that reveal such emotions. Cognizant of that fact, Christine and other mothers seemed intent upon teaching their children to omit such negative cues during gift receipt.

Related to this issue is that of teaching the child that he or she actually deserves presents. In this manner, gifts perform a similar singularizing function as birthday cakes. Paula remarked that children should learn, "How to feel special, how to allow themselves to be given to, and to take it gracefully....Somehow, if they could learn that by virtue of being born, you deserve some love and attention from family and friends." Further evidence that gift-giving is used to teach children specific skills is provided in our discussion of the ritual audience.

Socialization and Ritual Performance Roles

Otnes and McGrath (1994) observe that children can express various roles at birthday parties, such as the "birthday boy/girl," and the planner/helper. In addition, our informants discussed an additional role (that of teaching their child to be a good host or hostess. Given these children's ages, we were a bit surprised at the salience of this role.

Host/Hostess Roles. Two themes consistently emerged when mothers elaborated upon their child's role as host or hostess. First, mothers wanted their children to learn to be gracious. Barb stressed the importance of this skill:

I think [birthday parties] should teach them to be good...I've always emphasized the importance of Thank-You notes. They always have to write hand-written, whether it's just one sentence, but at least some acknowledgement to thank people for coming and thinking of them.

The importance of Thank-You notes was mentioned by four of our thirteen mothers. These young children could not write these notes by themselves; rather, mothers typically wrote them and instructed their children to sign or scribble on them. Interestingly, only one mother..."
the child participating spends on the present itself. Gift-giving is seen as a way to show them, too" (Wolfsohn 1979, p. 90). Indeed, participating in the gift-giving process is emphasized by mothers more than ways it should proceed. Our study reveals mothers apparently begin to instill such rules related to birthday parties in very young children. For example, Janet (who is Brazilian) observed her daughter liked to help make special candies for her birthday party, then said: "It is a special candy...it is not a birthday party without this candy."

In summary, the various ritual performance roles that children can express offer mothers many opportunities to instill values and knowledge relevant to the birthday party context in their children.

Socialization and the Ritual Audience

Children who are guests at birthday parties comprise the ritual audience for the event. Many mothers apparently expected their children to master several aspects of this role, namely: 1) to behave in a polite and controlled manner; 2) to be grateful for inclusion in the special context and 3) to celebrate someone else's special day. Part of this last lesson includes planning and delivering a birthday gift to another child.

Learning Good Behavior. Completions to the projective exercise "When I take my child to another child's party..." indicate the mother's behavioral expectations for guests. These completions included: "I stress the importance of being a good and well-mannered guest;" "I hope he will behave civilly, share and cooperate;" and "[t] instruct him on various party etiquettes."

Thus, children are expected to understand that at certain times, impression management is appropriate; in other words, their mothers expect them to act better than usual. This distinction, is sometimes communicated through the use of special clothing at birthday parties. Notably, girls' use of special items such as "party shoes" and tights may help communicate this lesson. Absent these cues, mothers take a more direct approach and specifically instruct their children to be well-behaved and polite.

Learning Gratitude for Inclusion. As guests, children are expected to express gratitude in the ritual celebration of another. Barb discussed the feelings of her daughter Edie: "She felt so special that they would call and ask her. I mean, kids really feel like it's the big thing to be invited to a party...Being included. It is just fun to help someone celebrate a birthday." Darlene mentioned that by going to birthday parties, "They feel loved and they know they have friends." In contrast, threats of exclusion can serve as powerful verbal weapons. Darlene noted that, especially among the girls, "they're saying 'If you're not nice to me, you can't come to my birthday party.'"

Inclusion in the birthday party of a friend may be the first opportunity children have to participate in a ritual celebration outside of their immediate kinship network. The children are given both symbolic and tangible access to a larger world through the homes, traditions and lifestyles of other families. They are exposed to a different set of practices and learn to appreciate "other people's lifestyles" and the fact that not every act the same.

Learning to Celebrate for Another. The audience is also socialized to give, rather than to receive. This includes giving presents, but also giving center-stage attention to the birthday child:

- There are some special moments in life that are marked. That the people you care about, you have these little traditions with them to honor them and that a lot of care and thoughtfulness goes into that to make the place festive or choose a gift thoughtfully to want to give to someone. I think that's very important and I'm very pleased my kids spontaneously do that. [Pam]

Paula wants her son Dean to learn "that these kids have special days, and these presents are not for you." In a more direct way, Sandra allows her twin daughters to choose separate gifts for friends whose parties they attending. Christine also allows her children to choose gifts for others' birthdays: "We go to the store and they help pick out presents." Indeed, little girls appear much more directly socialized to understand gift-buying at an early age (Otnes and McGrath 1994). Pam discusses her daughter's early involvement in gift-giving in general:

- I think it's a way of honoring the person...to spend a little time thinking about what would be an appropriate present for that child...And sometimes she wants to do presents that are not necessarily associated with birthdays...and I think that's great. So I don't discourage that.

Thus, some mothers expect their children not only to want to give, but also to give something that the birthday boy or girl would like.

The birthday child is certainly socialized to act according to various scripts when opening the gifts. Yet guests also learn to follow scripts during the gift-opening as well, for this event is "important to the children who have given gifts, for this is an opportunity for recognition for them, too" (Wolfsohn 1979, p. 90). Indeed, participating in the gift-giving process is emphasized by mothers more than the material artifact of the present itself. Gift-giving is seen as a way to show the child how to give graciously and how not to be selfish. When asked how much she spends on gifts for other children, Barb replied, "They're little things but it doesn't matter if it's a $2 gift or a $10 gift, it's just the gift giving and the child participating that's important and it makes it a lot of fun."
in fact, many children are eager to participate in this ritual script, with each vying for attention of the birthday child to open his/her present next. Responses from the "gift-giving" projective reflect the mothers' assessment of this script. Barb observed, "guests are also interested in the gifts and perhaps look forward to sharing the toy, book, etc." Darlene related in a projective story, "Meanwhile the other children are waiting for him (the birthday boy) to open their gift."

Just Having Fun. Interestingly, mothers also often expressed hope that their children simply enjoy parties. The noun "party" is transformed into a verb, as the children are presented with a variety of activities and foods for their enjoyment. Four of the thirteen completions to the sentence stem "When I take my child to another child's party..." indicate hope that the child will enjoy himself/herself. Much of the party presentation is with the needs of the ritual audience in mind. For example, Sandra ordered pizzas with various toppings to cater to the vegetarian guests. Faces are painted, treasure hunts are conducted and games are played with the express purpose of amusing the ritual audience. Yet often, those same mothers who hope their children just have fun have also provided indirect cues that related to expected attitudes or behavior.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Our study is one of the first to consider how consumers are socialized to participate in various rituals. By examining children's birthday parties, we could shed light upon the early stages of ritual socialization. We have demonstrated that through interactions and discussions, mothers teach their children how to use and understand specific goods and services in this setting.

Table 1 summarizes the socialization themes that emerged when each element of Rook's framework was examined. This table reveals that a few emerged across elements, namely, the need to educate children in party planning and gracious behavior. However, others were more specific to one particular element C.e.g., the need to instill good sportsmanship in children through game-playing. Overall, the range of instructional functions reveals that mothers take advantage of the multifaceted nature of birthday parties and use these contexts to impart a variety of lessons both inherent in, and generalizable beyond, the ritual itself. Yet the complex nature of these occasions also means that some of the lessons children receive are contradictory. For example, many children were expected to master both the ability to include others in their celebration and the ability to allow themselves to be singularized through cake and gifts. That some mothers expressed anxiety over their children's potential behavior and mentioned their children's initial anxiety at parties as well Could reflect the difficulty in resolving such ambiguous lessons when learning how to be a ritual participant.

**TABLE 1**

**SOCIALIZATION FUNCTIONS OF BIRTHDAY PARTIES**

**Future Research**

This study examined children who were just beginning to understand the meaning of birthday parties. It would thus be of interest to follow children throughout subsequent birthdays to discern changes in their ritual participation. A longitudinal case study of a subset of "birthday children" or a concurrent look at how various age groups celebrate birthdays could accomplish this objective. Obviously, the needs and wants of a three-year-old are different from those of a teenager. Even adults celebrate birthdays, although in much different ways. Given the expenditures devoted to birthdays in this culture, examining different age groups would enable marketers and retailers to define their needs and desires in a more comprehensive manner.

Similarly, the findings in this study can be related to more general issues of how children are socialized to become consumers. For example, exploring how children learn to plan purchases (such as a friend's gift or cake), how they learn to exchange goods, and how they gain consumer values (such as materialism or anti-materialism) could be included in future research.

Furthermore, this study interviewed middle-class mothers as socialization agents, which raises questions about a potential social response bias. Mothers who are well-read and working (like those of our sample) are typically aware of socially-dictated behaviors for themselves and their children, and thus their responses may reflect such a desire to have their children think of as well-behaved. However, actual behavior at birthday parties may be somewhat different than reported. Future research could thus involve examining the expectations of parents and children before parties with actual behavior at parties, and with follow-up reflections about parties.

Finally, as "traditional families" continue to change, undoubtedly so will the roles and identities of these socialization agents. Such questions arise as: Will "family" parties become an old-fashioned memory of the past? Will fathers, grandmothers, or hired "party planners," play a greater role in the party planning and socialization process? For while some traditional scripts of birthday parties are still practiced, more mothers have nontraditional roles outside of the home, and may find it necessary or desirable to hire someone to plan their children's parties for them. Likewise, there were allusions in our text to mothers who throw extravagant parties for their children to alleviate their guilt over not spending quality time with them. Certainly, these issues are worthy of further exploration in the face of dramatic sociological changes in our culture.

By studying consumers as they are socialized to participate in rituals, we gain a better understanding of how they master artifacts, scripts, performance roles and expectations of the audience. Moreover, given the pervasive nature of rituals in all cultures, continued study in this area is essential in order to achieve a holistic understanding of how consumers participate in symbolic consumption. Finally, marketers and retailers would benefit from gaining an understanding of the ways artifacts (and scripts for their use) are employed as tools for education and socialization as well.

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On the other hand, a case study of children from South Baltimore in the USA, shows us how some mothers encourage their daughters to show aggression to towards their peers in order to learn how to stand up for themselves.Â The five socializing agents consist of Family, School and Childcare, Peers, Mass media, and Community. As children

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