

LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Pre-Memorandum introduction to The National Childbirth Trust ("NCT")



The NCT is the UK's largest parenting charity established since 1965 (nct.org.uk). The key service offered is antenatal classes to support couples on what to expect in the lead up to and during the birth process.

A key component of the NCT parenting model is the extension of social interaction beyond the classroom with other fellow cohort peers providing invaluable mutual support during the pregnancy, lead up to birth and postnatally. Such bonds can form lifelong friendships and are a rich source of information and resource sharing and collaboration.



Excessive consumerism in the baby products market....



Executive Summary of Proposals and Stakeholder Interests

Issue	Recommendation	Outcome	Stakeholder interests	Social Psychology theories
NCT "ex-cohort" networks are not sufficiently utilised for wider community interactions following the completion of ante-natal classes. Cohorts tend to remain social friends within original group (supporting each other) but may want to seek wider involvement locally with other families.	Establish a platform for small groups of localised ex-cohorts to form new networks to support new cohorts and wider community.	Wider support provided to new expectant parent cohorts who benefit from knowledge and experience of ex-cohorts and facilitates a wider informal social network on a localised basis. Exchange of information is mutual and symbiotic.	Achieves the NCT mission to extend knowledge into community. Extends the reach of local NCT Branch by going deeper into the local community.	Social capital Social identity theory Social representations
High costs of baby products for new expectant parents can be mitigated by access to second hand products through a localised platform.	Establish an informal platform for the exchange, sale and gifting of second hand or unused baby products to new NCT parents and wider community.	This local and informal platform can occur on an informal (as needed) basis. Economic and social benefits realised through the platform including recommendations as to products. Platform easily managed and advertised. Reduces waste and disposal.	An informal platform for exchange of second hand products benefitting all parties – recipients that need them, sellers reduce storage, recycle and reuse items through sale and the NCT branch who can charge a small fee (e.g.) from sales and/or by joining up the cohorts on entry (access fee). NCT branch benefits from	Extended self /Shared self Social proofing Socioeconomic platform (SEP) Installation theory

			extending deeper roots across wider community.	
Less affluent parents and communities excluded from NCT antenatal education network and social community benefits.	Establish a charity/retail partnership whereby NCT partners with a commercial organisation to deliver subsidised teaching/services based on shopping credits made at store (e.g. Lidl, Co-Op). Consumer receives credits exchangeable for NCT services.	A more joined up community with wider and equalised access to the NCT services, facilitating social cohesiveness. Use of retail platform to extend desired influence in harder to reach communities.	NCT achieves stated aim to extend reach in community and increases potential revenue. Clients feel entitlement to NCT services through retail expenditure (rather than charitable benevolence) and Retailer extends social influence in marketplace.	Reciprocity Social capital Installation theory

Memorandum: strategic business recommendations for The National Childbirth Trust

Dear Mr Wilkie,

24 March, 2017

Congratulations on passing the half-way point in your first “1,000 days” in office as the National Childbirth Trust’s (“NCT”) Chief Executive Officer, since your appointment in July 2015.

I am writing to you as a student studying for a MSc in Social Psychology at the London School of Economics and a one-time user of NCT’s services. My family and I greatly benefited from a core strength of the NCT’s proposition – the social support network at the time of the classes with other local parents. These friendships continue to-day and are a pillar of NCT’s success story.

I am particularly interested in NCT’s mission statement to “expand the support” and “reach less affluent communities and parents at risk of isolation”¹.

In this paper, I wish to suggest three recommendations based on social psychology theory that I believe may make a meaningful impact to your strategy. These are:

Issue	Recommendation	Outcome
Under-utilised existing ex-NCT parent cohort networks and data.	Establish platform for small groups of local ex-cohort and new cohort parents to form own networks and develop wider community participation.	Deeper support, friendships and sociality provided to new expectant NCT parents and the wider community.
High costs of new baby products for new parents and redundant items held by local ex-NCT cohort parents.	Establish informal marketplace for exchange, sale and gifting of second hand or unused products. NCT can charge and access and introduction fee.	Economic and social benefits, including recommendations as to “tried and tested” products. Sustainability through reduce, reuse and recycle of products
Less affluent parents do not benefit from NCT services or classes in their communities.	Establish a new NCT/Retail partnership to deliver subsidised NCT teaching and benefits based on accumulated credits.	A more joined up community with wider and equalised access to NCT services with national retail support.

¹ <https://www.nct.org.uk/about-nct/vision-and-strategy>

The following pages explain these recommendations in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

Utilising the existing networks

An NCT parents network would be introduced into local areas where parents had previously taken NCT ante natal classes. Such parents may wish to continue their involvement with the NCT community in a localised manner, so as to impart knowledge to and support new expectant NCT parents and more widely in the community. The NCT database of parents is a considerable resource and can be utilised further by NCT and parents through necessary consents being provided.

The network would extend the reach of existing NCT branches that operate across a wider geographical area by using the existing NCT database to bring more local ties and connections together in community.

The NCT social bonds that are formed during the original ante natal classes continue as close friendships as children grow. The experience, knowledge and social benefits accrued can be made available to the wider community, including the sharing or recommendations of consumer products. These are relevant for new people arriving into the community and having children, local couples embarking on parenthood and to other parts of the community that may not currently access NCT services.

This initiative would encourage greater physical proximity between local parents who have attended NCT classes and can offer their experience, knowledge and support on an informal basis (outside the NCT classes).

A key outcome would be to establish an informal market place with new NCT cohorts and expectant parents for the trading and exchange of second hand baby and infant clothes and products accumulated during the “first 1000 days”² of infancy and beyond.

Establishing an informal market place

NCT recognises that buying new baby products incurs a substantial cost for new expectant parents but which only last for a short period of time before becoming redundant. The social network and platform would enable ex-cohort parents to trade, exchange or gift their second-hand or unused products that are no longer needed to new NCT cohort parents. This platform could be enabled by the NCT branch joining up ex-cohort groups (through

² <https://www.nct.org.uk/about-nct/first-1000-days>

email or Facebook) and advertised through a variety of channels, including NCT website, NCT classes, NCT branch, Facebook and local word of mouth. NCT would charge a small access fee on both sides: ex NCT cohorts and new cohorts being joined up. This would contribute to its ability to provide ante natal classes to less affluent in society as described below. This market place would supplement existing NCT nearly new sales that occur infrequently by being a more informal process and requiring no NCT centralised operation to function, thus reducing overhead costs.

The simplest model for exchange or sale of products would be through the physical meeting of parents (either 1-2-1 or small group) locally proximate to each other and the exchange or sale to take place at homes. For example, bags of clothes and other baby/infant products could be left with parents to review and a transaction conducted over the email. This exchange or meeting obviates time and costs of setting up a web site for product exchanges and also carries the advantage of social interactions in a real physical environment, i.e. it is easier to manage. In addition, a rating system would be devised through which parents can share knowledge of the usefulness (or not) of specific products. Products which are not sold or exchanged can be donated to the local NCT branch to be made available to wider community as a gift. The market place proposition also addresses the far wider sustainability agenda in society.

Reaching the wider community

Reaching less affluent and marginalised communities is a challenge for charities, particularly to engage “buy-in” from the relevant community. Although NCT offers volunteer opportunities for more affluent parents to help the wider community through altruism, this may not address how a deeper level of engagement is enabled. In order to address this, I suggest a partnership with a national retailer whereby “NCT credits” can be acquired through everyday shopping with a retailer, such as Lidl or Co-Op. In this manner, the Lidl/Co-op customer gains entitlement to the NCT services (which can be subsidised) and the retailer extends social influence. Such partnerships are a successful model in achieving a much wider penetration into communities, and Asda is a successful example³.

³ <https://www.asdafoundation.org/partnerships>

Social Psychology theories to support Business recommendations

Extending the existing Parents' network

The NCT cohorts network is and becomes an exclusive grouping after classes have finished and are not typically widened into the broader community. The benefits of extending and widening social networks across community are well recognised as enriching the overall social capital a person can acquire through a lifetime, and “enables them to appropriate social energy” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.241). This approach can be utilised for expectant parents seeking to acquire new contacts as they enter the community of parenthood and simultaneously are exposed to considerable pressures to consume a vast array of baby related products. While they will acquire some of this consumer knowledge through their own NCT cohort interactions, they can benefit from the experiences and knowledge of parents who have already been through this stage. The exposure to an experienced based knowledge system may act as a System 2 moderator to the System 1 heuristic (Samson & Voyer, 2012) when first time parents are bombarded with new and material exposures to baby products.

The timing of a new life event such as prospective motherhood or parenthood can also initiate the desire for information in preparation for the life event such as advice received through a social network (Schäfer, Jaeger-Erben & Bamberg, S., 2012). It would be attractive for the NCT to therefore present the opportunity of a wider and deeper social network available in the community at the *first opportunity* when the new NCT cohort groups present for ante natal classes with the teacher, and are thinking about “doing family” (Schäfer et al, 2012, p.81). Life events are also acknowledged as a “window of opportunity” for changing consumptive behaviours to more sustainable patterns (Schäfer et al, 2012, p.67). Consumptive behavioural changes can extend to all aspects of the new family life, including the acquisition of second hand baby products and clothes through a market platform, as proposed in the next section.

From the perspectives of the existing local parents, the action of joining up with new expectant parents satisfies a joint desire for common affiliation as parents meet their new social roles in the community. This behaviour is consistent with social identity and self categorisation theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Parents of young children/infants seek to

form in-groups with each other and favourably compare their in-group to out-group members. By doing so, and on a geographically proximate and localised basis, as proposed through the network extension, the in-group can also satisfy the desire to “stay at or near home” (Schäfer, 2012, p.77) thus reducing long distance mobility and increasing (local) walking, a further sustainability benefit. Location proximity is also a key component of the market place opportunity, discussed in the next section.

Equally, it is recognised that communities are diverse in to-day’s society and although there may be levels of common parental identity through in-group membership, not all persons may align to the identity; for example, gay parents and families bring a very different family normative and perspective to the community (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). In this respect, it is important to address the commonality of parenting as a “project” through which people can move through community and form cohesive bonds notwithstanding different identities (Howarth, Cornish, & Gillespie, A., 2015). Such project based conceptualisation is additive to the extended social network proposal – it “makes community”.

Establishing an informal market place

The UK childrenswear market is estimated to be approximately £5.6bn (Craik, 2015), of which baby and infant clothing is a significant proportion and the luxury goods market is now targeting this sector (Abnett, K., 2016). As a parents’ charity, NCT can facilitate and encourage a low expense alternative where expenditure on new baby clothes and products is significant (Stott, 2014). This can be achieved through the extended network market place platform. While some baby and infant clothes are gifted items from family (e.g. baby blankets) and may become “material possession attachments” (Kleine & Baker, 2004) through which self is extended (Belk, 1988), it is important to differentiate these from other baby clothes and products that are more of a commodity nature. These do not form the same level of emotional attachment and may outlive their functional purpose once a child surpasses a certain age or size or a parental life stage is triggered such as a mother returning to work (Kleine & Baker, 2004). Such items are the key focus of the market place proposition and can cover a huge array of every day baby/infant clothing items and other products (e.g. toys). Belk also recognises that a “key way of expressing and defining group membership is through shared consumption symbols” (Belk, 1998, p.152). The parental

symbol of rearing children is an individual *and* shared collective communal activity. The ability to pass on, exchange or trade second hand clothes and items becomes a way of defining collective membership of the group and reinforces the parental communal bonds in a neighbourhood. Belk and Llamas (2013) extend this argument to the present day in their conception of “sharing in” and “sharing out” and specifically describe the neighbourhood sharing organisation concept:

“Beneath the surface . . . a broader purpose of these organisations is to help recreate a sense of community . . . This is not only a way to create the trust needed to share resources, but also to create the neighbourhood sense of extended self that we now see as largely a thing of the past.” (Belk & Llamas, 2013, p.268).

As social networks grow, the ability to utilise a market place platform can produce multiple benefits that address the psychological dynamics at the time a baby enters the family and the wider community. It is an opportune moment to create trust and share resources and while extending self through infant, parents can also extend self through community; “you are what you share.” (Belk & Llamas, 2013, p.270). Thus, a virtuous cycle of clothes release (through exchange or sale) and acquisition between local parents is realised while at the same time facilitating changes in consumptive behaviour. It becomes a fully functioning socioeconomic platform with a prominent sustainability focus.

A further recommendation of the market place platform is to introduce a rating system that would apply to second hand baby products, such as food preparing devices, milk warmers, listening devices, clothes and the wider panoply of products (all of which have a limited time span as the child grows). Through the widening social connections of the local parent groups, a rating system could be developed around the use and purposefulness of such products. The more the platform is used the wider its appeal potential as “The greater number of people who find any idea correct, the more a given individual will perceive the idea to be correct” (Cialdini, 2001, p.110). Social proofing is a powerful tool already enabled by the NCT in attracting people to its NCT ante natal classes. Through the dynamic of social proofing, NCT can extend its reach into the community and local parents can also seek to galvanise a market platform with useful consumer rating knowledge. Cialdini notes that “powerful imitative effects have been found . . . in diverse activities as purchase decisions

and charity donations” (Cialdini, 2001, p. 140). Social influence and proofing therefore can form key drivers to extend wider participation through the extended cohort network.

The geographical *proximity* of the extended network through local neighbourhood and community is also relevant to the development of an informal market place because it will offer a recognisable and familiar physical affordance (Gibson (as cited in Lahlou, 2015, p.197)) to the persons who engage in the activity. Participants in the market are able to walk along their street with a selection of second hand items and, following a prior arrangement, enter the home of the local neighbour in the same or nearby street to agree on the exchange or sale of suitable items. The physical affordance of proximate streets, neighbourhoods and community afford the possibility of frequent and impactful social interactions; in contrast to a non-physical, disengaged encounter that frequently takes place over the internet. We also carry embodied representations of what it means to engage with neighbours for a specific purpose or action, such as borrowing coffee or a kitchen implement. This can extend into the wider goal of second hand clothes sales or exchanges between local parents, many of whom may be focussed on similar goals. The social rules and norms of the institutional layer guide us on how to behave in another’s home when conducting a transaction. In order to simplify potential social embarrassment as to negotiating prices, these can be agreed in advance by email.

While social capital, identity, influence and installation contexts are important social psychological drivers in neighbourhoods of a relatively homogeneous shape, we need to consider alternative tools to reaching wider communities that may not share all of these motivations. This is the subject of the next section.

Reaching the wider community

The NCT/Retail partnership is intended to address the challenges of the extent to which the NCT can reach less affluent communities and overcome the perception of NCT as an exclusive club relevant to only one strand of society (.

Nonreciprocal altruism, such as through second hand clothes gifting benefits the giver but does not have the same impact on the receiver in terms of self extension (Belk, 1988). Equally, the social network extension proposal as outlined, being a form of social capital, may not benefit all communities. Savage (2015) highlights Bourdieu’s critique of social

capital as “a means of the powerful and privileged to use their connections to help each other and protect their interests – and thereby shut out those who lack such social capital (Savage, 2013, p. 131). Similarly, Portes (1998, p. 15) demonstrates the negative consequences as “exclusion of outsiders”. Silber also highlights Bourdieu’s views on gift giving as “part and parcel of social evils and masking mechanisms” (Silber, 2009, p.178).

Installation theory (Lahlou, in press; Lahlou, 2015) provides an analytical tool to address how the psychosocial issues and challenges advanced above may be resolved. In order to reach less affluent parts of society, it is suggested that an everyday installation is an efficient way to promote the NCT ante natal services. This would be achieved through an affiliation and credits scheme whereby customers acquire credits through regular shopping are accumulated over time in order to gain access to a subsidised level of ante natal course (and other services). Such partnerships are demonstrated to work well between the charity sector and retail chains (Wilkerson, 2009; Liston-Heyes, C., & Liu, G., 2010) with each side acquiring benefits in the relationship; legitimisation for the retailer and funding and support for the charity (transaction based support in the case of retailer).

Installations, such as retail shops, are effective in providing a physical affordance for young parents to buy goods (baby/infant and other) and by doing so to receive a credit in exchange. Unlike traditional charitable enterprises, these are not altruistic gifts incapable of reciprocity by the recipient but form an actual entitlement that can be transformed into a contact to receive an NCT service or product. It is suggested the sense of entitlement forms the psychological representational layer that “if I buy something, I receive something in exchange”; in this case, the acquired product coupled with an associated NCT credit. In a different manner to the local neighbourhood street affordance described above (to facilitate its market place), the retail shop provides the physical layer for a transaction centred encounter to take place in a familiar market place, leading to an affiliation with the NCT, and a change in behaviour in considering NCT services. Following Thaler and Sunstein, “Installation theory is a theory for nudging” (Lahlou, 2015, p.194). The more frequently the shopping experience is repeated, the stronger the association with receiving the credit becomes and is further imprinted as a representational layer in the person’s mind: “The subject makes sense of the environment by recognizing some significant pattern” (Lahlou, 2015, p.197).

Once established as a natural conduit to a change of behaviour through the affordance of the physical layer of retail shopping (and through which representations of entitlement become regularised), we must return to the community as the final institutional layer through which excluded communities can themselves reap the benefits of the NCT services. The installation “loop” is completed when the community adopts its own norms, rules and regulations as to the immediate and wider social benefits, and in doing so creates its own social capital from within. The institution of community then “takes over the educative part of the installation: changing representations” for future generations (Lahlou, 2015, p. 209).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to support NCT in its key objectives to expand the support and reach further into the community. These objectives are framed within a consumer psychology context where sustainability and affordability of baby products are key issues in the new parent world. It is hoped that the three recommendations of network extension, market place and retail partnership can build on the successes of the existing community model that NCT has developed over its 50+ year history. A socioeconomic platform is key. The introduction of an alternative conceptualisation on how to attract a wider demographic in the community may also, over time, develop its own successes.

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