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'Bear necessities': toys, settings and emotional becoming

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I will start with a clarification and apology; two thank yous; and two further clarifications and confessions.

This first is that, with regret, I missed the Chris Philo lecture that set the scene for John's paper, as I was involved in a parallel session at the 2015 RGS-IBG conference. Thus I did not witness the 'teddy moment'. But, I could not have raised my hand even if I had wanted to indicate I owned a teddy. I have now since read the lecture as the article (Philo 2016).

Further thanks are for, first, being invited to make this comment, and second, to John for his very kind words about my work in his paper.

Clarification one; I never owned /used or felt attachment for any cuddly toy – as far as I remember (how sad maybe). I cannot remember them being a feature of mine or my five older siblings' early or later childhood life (some other toys yes, but we had a whole farm landscape to engage and play with). But, more significantly, I went to boarding school at the age of, something like, seven years six months. Teddies and the like at university might be one thing, but teddies in the potentially harsh emotional climate of the boarding school dormitory quite another. Any hint of something like a teddy in such a place opened up great risks of teasing and bullying. To share a bed with a teddy of some kind, in a dormitory of ten, maybe more, boys of a similar age would be risky – to say the least. Just because of the kind of emotions and possible attachments and needs it might hint at, the openings it might offer into one's private (vulnerable) self.

I don't think I sucked my fingers at school, or if so certainly secretly, but as a toddler – at home, I sucked the fingers of my left hand so much that – to this day – the index finger is slightly distorted. Children need security and comfort – they find these in many ways, and the residues of such practices (even old toys) can stay with them. John, and Philo (2016), discuss how, famously, John Betjeman's toys went everywhere with him, (attracting some possibly derogatory comments on his seriousness as a poet). To deny means of comfort and attachment, to children, and lingering memories of such, explicitly or implicitly, is perhaps to stress them, challenge their well-being. I have never really reflected upon it, but now I do – I

can't remember teddies at my two boarding schools at all. Maybe they were there – in secret. (Where are the social and cultural geographies of boarding schools by the way?).

Clarification two. Our two sons, now adults, had, between them, over a period of time, hundreds of soft toys, a large sack-full when 'tidied up' – the excesses of contemporary childhood consumption maybe. Many were just casual acquaintances, like the lesser cast in the *Toy Story* films, bit part players in the emotional/imaginary dramas of the bedroom/household. But there were a few dearly loved, and steadfast, bed companions as well. When I sat on our sons' bed when they were the age I went away to school, reading them a story as they snuggled down with said teddies to sleep, it brought back to me that this was the age I went away to school, where most home comforts, including cuddles, kisses, stories, teddies were distant longings only.

In regard to the discomfort at conferences and reluctance to open up that John highlights, I think that is common and pretty inevitable. It is a temporary community of, mostly, strangers; people with anxieties about status, career and image in what can be a competitive, even seemingly judgemental environment. I would urge all to combat this by being open and accepting and embracing, in personal, status and intellectual terms. But that is easier said than done. Beyond that I feel that more private insecurities and possible perceived frailties, or other matters that are deemed 'private' (e.g. sexuality), still often remain relatively hidden in academic accounts. To reveal them at all is unnerving. In a conference lecture theatre even more so.

This is a shame. We are all in this – being humans in this profoundly troubled and troubling period of history – together. The mental health statistics in the UK are pretty terrifying. Mental health provision remains a 'second class' issue in policy and funding terms. In my work I have briefly alluded to some suicidal and self-harming thoughts I grapple with (Jones 2016). I am not sure if that has helped me – or not – but it is an important part of the story about (child)self-time-memory-landscape-place I am trying to figure out as I go along.

Now having a teddy, or similar, is obviously not a sign of mental fragility or disorder, maybe the reverse. But those private passions and habits, or signs of – not weakness, but, well, whatever the opposite of the stiff upper lip is - maybe reside in the same affective zones as the desire for, affection for, a soft toy or two - in the apparently private, idiosyncratic world?

Confidence, assertiveness, self-assuredness, independency, a degree of self-regard even, are all attributes we are encouraged to engender in order to develop our ‘careers’, to advance the work we do, to achieve individual goals and happiness. I assume a few self-help books espouse embracing frailty and anxiety, but the ones I have glanced at seem to go the other way, to seek to overcome these. But what if the work we do is all, or partly about, what it is to need love, to feel insecure, anxious, to carry wounds, as so many people do. What then?

Playfulness is a challenge. Play of a certain kind is a serious thing. It might be so for children. I worry that adults being playful in the child-ish sense is a colonisation of children’s affective emotional realm by adults. But I do agree that playfulness can be a bridge between adults and children – rough and tumble for example – in which cuddly toys can become casualties – or weapons – or both.

I think John’s point about material cultures of childhood is very important. Crazes of games and figures have swept through our house like wildfire – Warhammer figures, construction systems, card collecting of various kinds. These seem to be vital currencies of childhood, but clearly there are questions of the commercialisation and exploitation of childhood, families, parenting, grand-parenting and so on through these. The sheer volume of stuff in at least some modern childhoods is startling.

John has been a leading light in *Children Geographies*, often working with Peter Kraftl, not least in some key articles in this journal, and their joint editorship of it along with Elsbeth Robson. John’s reflections do point to as yet relatively unexplored territories of children, family and household geographies. I certainly endorse the call for researchers to develop ‘affecting modes of thinking-writing-researching’. I look forward to seeing new papers from new scholars, and more work from John, and his collaborators, and to make small contributions myself if possible.

References

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