

Winner of the 'ITRA - BTHA Prize for outstanding toy research'
Senior Research Prize

Jan Phillips. Accomplishing family through toy consumption. In Karin M. Ekstrom & Birgitte Tufte (eds.). (2007). Children, media and consumption. Goteborg, Sweden: NORDICOM. Pp. 287-300.

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Phillips explores the ways family members, including children, negotiate the purchase uses, and meanings of toys, arguing that this form of interaction helps define and construct not just family members as consumers – the “deserving” child, say, or “generous” parents – but, more importantly, the social essence of family. This is studied using current literature and drawing on recollections of childhood memories.

Rather than treat children as incompletely socialized “others” still preparing for life, children deserve to be studied as competent social actors, capable of helping to construct their own lives and family trajectories with worthwhile desires, abilities, and contributions.

The paper explores the ways humans accomplish family through toy consumption featuring qualitative content analysis of 141 retrospective childhood memory texts gathered over 6 years, written by a group of both traditional-aged (18-22 years old) and older, “non-traditional” aged college students in the United States.

Students in sociology classes were asked to relate childhood to the activities and material objects that constituted everyday consumption.

Students did this in an intensely personal way through several assignments, one of which asked them to write a prose or poetry ode to a favourite childhood toy. Other assignments asked them to interview someone older than 65 about their remembered childhood play and work.

In the toy ode, students noted why it was their favourite toy, how they acquired it, what it meant to play with the toy, and what it permitted them to do, or do better. They also commented on the role toys played in social life. The resulting odes, up to six pages in length, recollected not only the material artefacts themselves but also issues of selfhood, intention, desire, and their relationship to these objects. Profound attachments and emotions thus get reflected in astonishingly creative odes, which sometimes were accompanied by in-class visits from the toys themselves.

The study found that children use their desire to make claims and position themselves within their family, to solidify age cohorts and culture, to steer and appropriate adult indulgence, and to resist the powerful adults they live with. Many of the 141 toy odes talked openly and poignantly about childhood desire and material possession. Nearly a third (44 odes) used the explicit language of desire, with such phrases as “had to have it”, “anticipated”, “wanted”, “desired”, “waited for”, “begged for” or “craved”. For instance, a first-year female student (about 19 years old), wrote of her stuffed animal;

‘Since the time I first saw you alone up on the shelf

I knew I had to have you all for myself'.

As this memory revealed, the familiar refrain of childhood longing easily changed into possession, wherein the sense that a toy belonged to the child alone marked it as all the more cherished.

As Mergen (1992) notes, '*Toys are gifts meant to form bonds between adults and children, especially at family-centred rituals such as Christmas and birthdays.*' Add birth itself as another opportunity for ritualised, family-centred toy gifting, and 40% (58) of the toys described in the 141 odes are acknowledged as originating in such rituals.

Children are masterful learners, capable of managing their social and emotional resources well enough to ensure that gifts are not entirely a surprise.

'What I really wanted, though, was the McDonald's play-set. Not only could I pretend I was a cashier, but I could cook food as well! My mother must have refused to buy it for me on ten different occasions before I was finally given it. On that tenth trip my grandmother had come to the store with us. I asked for the McDonald's play-set and was denied again. However, instead of moving on I threw a temper tantrum! And it worked. My grandmother bought the play-set that day'. [19-year old female]

'My sister was the eldest in the family (13 years older) and I had very limited interaction time with her. I worshipped my sister; I wanted her attention in the worst way. With Barbie, I was able to gain that attention from her. My sister was an excellent sewer (so I thought) and I would ask her to sew Barbie clothes, blankets, sleeping bags, etc. She loved to do it. This was the avenue I took advantage of to form a bonding relationship with my sister.... [Later, when the sister began dating and was less available] I missed the attention of my sister, and through this style of fantasy play I imagined she was still with me. My "Blonde to Brunette" Barbie became my surrogate sister. I could switch her head and pretend that she was my sister speaking, then switch it to blonde and pretend it was me answering'. [33-year-old female]

Similarly, another respondent says,

'If my mother had told me that I couldn't do or have something, then in my play [with a Cabbage Patch doll] I would make sure that my child was able to do or have it. I used situations as those to challenge the authority of my parents and assert control over my life.' [female, 20 years old]

Interestingly, one final way of using toys to help construct family appears in these odes: children frequently and insistently attribute life, if not family membership, to their playthings.

'I even made Bear [a stuffed gorilla] an official green card with his picture on it. We all had green cards, Immigration and Naturalization cards stating we were legal to be in this country. We would frequently take family trips to Canada and I was always very insistent the Border Patrol check out Bear's card to make sure he was accepted in Canada and then again on the return to the United States'. [32-year-old female]

Personifying a toy and making it fictive kin stands as perhaps the most literal way children turn consumption practices to constructing family. And they may do so in ways that overtly resist other family members, as in the case of one female [age not known] and her “talking Teddy”:

‘Not only did she speak but also she spoke Bear language. This was a language that only I understood.... so I could make her say anything I wanted. I could tell my sister she was ugly, or my brother that he was a pain and then I would tell my mom that Kaitlin [the bear] said it and I just repeated it!’

What toy memories tell us

Adults, recollecting their childhoods, remember toy play for what a child might gain: fun, power and control over something, a way to let out frustration or aggression, responsibility, the ability to become a collector, comfort, a sense of adulthood, and social acceptance. They also remember what toys permitted them to do, or do better, toward accomplishing family.

‘Toys are unique belongings; they are played with for only a few years, but the memory of our love for them stays with us for the rest of our lives. I imagine myself as a real-life Citizen Kane, on my death bed muttering “Mickey” [her Mickey Mouse toy]. My Mickey is like Rosebud; he represents a time all adults wish to return to, no matter what they become in the future.’