"Natural enchantment" versus "commodified enchantment": The materiality of idealized childhoods in Norway and the United States

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This paper provides a cross-cultural textual analysis of the representation of middle class childhoods in Norway and the United States. Our data are drawn from over 200 entries in what we call "teddy diaries", which is a unique form of correspondence between schools and families. Teddy diaries have been used in Norwegian primary schools for many years as a resource for classroom reading, oral participation, and the development of ties between schools and families. The data we obtained from schools in Oslo was naturally occurring, whereas it was the research team who introduced this practice as a form of data collection in suburban public schools in the New York mid-Hudson Valley.

In both sites, first grade classrooms were provided with a teddy bear and a diary, both of which traveled home for overnight visits with each child. While visiting, the bear’s experiences were recorded in the diary and then returned to the classroom to be shared with the class. Such publicly circulated information about children’s home lives produces texts that are saturated by social norms and evaluative observations of their own and each other’s daily lives. As such, these diary entries are appropriate textual material for studying cultural values and ideals. This highly saturated text is well-suited to a cross-cultural comparison of materiality in twenty-first century children’s lives because the texts reflect normative ideals about consumption practices and their relationship to family life and idealized middle class childhoods.

Drawing on these diary entries, we analyze the material representation of childhoods in Norway and the U.S. The textual representation of middle class families suggests that parents in both cultural contexts seek to construct childhood as a time of commodified enchantment. Although representations of childhoods are structured in similar ways, the New York diaries emphasize an ideal childhood "made of" an array of name-brand products, whereas the Oslo diaries emphasize physical activity and spending time outdoors. These differences highlight the manner in which families in both contexts try to facilitate a sense of belonging for children and signal claims to peer groups and diffuse localized family cultures.

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