Facing the void: Recollections of embodying fear in the space of childhood homes

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ABSTRACT

Homes occupy a complex and contradictory space in our lived, symbolic and imaginary geographies. Often idealised as a sanctuary, homes are also places of conflict, tension and danger. The research presented in this paper used a Memory Work Group method to explore women's recollections of embodying fear as children, in the context of their childhood homes. Our analysis suggests that experiences of fear were remembered in terms of a sense of separation, or being in a relational void. This void can be described as a felt and sensed relational space, characterised by a lack of communication and sense of nothingness. As such, others were present, but the child experienced not being seen/not seeing others, simultaneously being there with the other, but also experiencing not existing to the other. We suggest here that remembered experiences of fear were lived through materially, and in process with objects and spaces not as passive backdrops, but as giving opportunity to and participating in meaning making and the management of the embodiment of fear, and felt sense of relational void. These findings are discussed in relation to the role of children's imagination in navigating the disparity between child and adult experiences of the world, as well as the potential role of memory as a route to bridging the gap between child and adult understandings and experiences of embodying emotion.

1. The home and emotion

Homes occupy a complex and contradictory space in our lived, symbolic and imaginary geographies. Firstly, the broad organization of space along a public/private binary (Massey, 1994), often designates the homes as a private realm, identified with the self, emotion (Curtis, 2010; Mallet, 2004; Morley, 2000; Cooper, 1971) and freedom from external surveillance (Saunders and Williams, 1988). As argued by Hareven (1991), such an understanding of the home emerged in the West after the Industrial Revolution, and entailed a clearer separation of home and paid work spaces than had existed previously (although this separation has never been quite complete, see Massey, 1994), as well as an emergence of the nuclear family as the ideal domestic unit. As Mallet (2004) outlines, a further shift to the individualisation of responsibility since the 1970s has been argued to further cement the association between "house, home and family" (p. 66), as indicated by an increasing emphasis on home ownership (Madigan et al., 1990).

Prevalent conceptions of the meaning of 'home' therefore, can be seen to identify this kind of space as, ideally, a private, domestic space identified with the self and family life. Multiple studies have found that one experience of the home afforded by these characteristics is a sense of agency and safety (Davidson, 2000; McGrath et al., 2008; McGrath and Reavey, 2015), finding a 'safe haven' (Pinfold, 2000) from the world.

It would be simplistic, however, to conceive of the home as a universal 'safe haven' that is always characterised by agency and territory (Wright, 1991; Wardaugh, 1999). Wardaugh (1999) points out that such arguments ignore both the violence and abuse that occurs within many homes, as well as implicitly exclude those who do not fit into the 'ideal home' being conjured, which she argues is assumed to contain a suburban, white, middle-class, heterosexual, nuclear family. Willis et al., (2015), for instance, have identified experiences of child sexual abuse (CSA) as a 'present absence' in much geographical research, whereby the prevalence of experiences of abuse often within home

spaces are left unexamined, casting a shadow through the discipline. In addition, the same authors (2016) explore how adult survivors of CSA navigate personal geographies, including creating boundaries and the importance of creating and maintain feelings of safety. Douglas (1991) indeed, has argued that the common vision of the home as haven is overlaid with nostalgia, out of sync with the complexity, mundanity and oppression lived through and maintained in many home spaces. Blunt and Varley (2004: 3) capture this inherent complexity, suggesting: "As a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life".

Repositioning the process of living at the centre of our understanding of the home in this way, recalls Ingold's (2011: 139) concept of 'dwelling', which he characterised as: "not the occupation of a world already built, but the very process of inhabiting the earth". Homes as opposed to mere houses, Ingold argues, are made up of joint practices, habits and shared activity. As such, it can be argued that the embodiment of emotion is central to an understanding of home as relational, and produced through joint practices and activity. Emotion can in this context be understood as a continuous process of felt and sensed being in, and living through, the relational and material space of home, in process with objects and others (Ahmed, 2006). As described by Denzin, embodied experience is a process of living through time and space:

The lived body is a temporalized spatial structure. That is, the person's spatial movements, locations, and relocations can be understood only as movements within time … The body does not fill up space in the same way that other real, physical things do or a piece of equipment does. The person takes space in and determines her own locations, making room for herself as she moves about and draws things near (2007: 58)

Denzin here articulates the embodied person as significantly different to other material objects in space, exactly through an emphasis on embodiment as being in continuous motion (Del Busso and Reavey, 2013). Subjectivity, thus, is constructed in process with the spatial world, and through our ability to move towards and away from other people. The containment of the home, for instance can afford both agency (e.g. seeking sanctuary) and disempowerment (e.g. being sent to your room), formed through the relationships, shared practices, and the shifting affective space of the particular home. This paper will explore adult memories of embodying fear in the childhood home, as a route to unpacking some of these tensions inherent in the home space. As we consider in more detail in the methodology, this approach brings tensions of its own, raising the question of whether adults can ever access the emotional worlds of children (Philo, 2003; Jones, 2001, 2003, 2008). Here we propose that Memory Work, with its concern with experience, emotion, embodiment and space, and acknowledgment of the precarious and ambiguous nature of remembering, is a useful vehicle for exploring adult memories of childhood, and addressing some of the concerns raised by Jones (2001, 2003, 2008). First, however, we need to explore some of the links between childhood, emotion, and space.

1.1. Childhood, emotion and space

The contradictions noted above, positioning the home as a space of both agency and disempowerment; safety and danger, are arguably even more acute when considering childhood experiences. Much of the research on home considers the construction and experience of adults, whilst children's experiences are less visible (Bartos, 2013; Holloway, 2014). As Holloway (2014) outlines, within multiple disciplines there has been a move towards understanding and theorising children as valid subjects, rather than adults in waiting (James et al., 1998). Nevertheless, children still face "spatial marginalization" (Holloway, 2014: 5), having reduced capacity to shape their environment compared to many adults. Home spaces for children are still, however, a critical site for experiencing and learning about emotions.

Psychological research tells us that early relationships are crucial for learning about the meaning, impact and 'regulation' of emotions; it is through our relationships with intimate others that we first learn about the world, ourselves and the capacity, meaning and appropriateness of our emotional experiences (e.g., Vygotsky, 1926). Mayall (1998: 144) argues that while school comprises the main social world for UK children, home is the space through which children learn about intimate relationships, including 'private' emotions. She argues that children "participate in constructing the moral and social order of the home", a joint enterprise between children and adults.

We thus approach the idea of children's subjectivity through the lens of seeing children as active subjects and agentic participants in the joint practices of the home; this comes with a caveat that children are still less powerful agents than adults. Research exploring children's experiences of home, does indeed outline a role for children's active management of space as a route for negotiating their emotional experiences. Korpela et al., (2002), for instance highlight that children's 'favourite places' tend to be contemplative places which they seek out for either 'restoration' or 'emotion-regulation', often without the knowledge of their parents. Bartos (2013) has argued that children have a more sensorial experience of space than adults, highlighting a need to explore children's experiences of emotion and space. Boschetti (1987) also found that 'environmental autobiographies' written by students of their childhood memories, contained a particular affinity for enclosed spaces which afforded seclusion, exploration and imagination. These can be seen as an agentic move by children to recreate the adult-defined experience of home as a place of safety and territory. One point to note from these examples is that whilst children occupy the same space as adults, they do so in particular and separate ways. As such, adults and children are thus both proximate and distant. Geographers of childhood, such as Jones (2003, 2008) and Philo (2003), have for example discussed the "otherness" of children" (Jones, 2008). Jones (2008: 195) suggests that otherness can be understood in terms of an inevitable "unbridgebility of self and other", and relates the otherness of childhood to differences between "adult and child becoming". Children can thus be understood as "becoming" through processes of development, growth and learning, which are different to those of adults. As such, a key difference between the becoming of adult and children highlighted here, is the role of imagination and play in children's meaning making and negotiation of the world. Furthermore, developmental psychologists (Cole et al., 1978), drawing on Vygotsky (1926, 1967), have long argued that imagination provides a ladder between the space of childhood and adulthood. Vygotskian theories of play (Bodrova and Leong, 2015) thus posit that through play and imagination, children transform the objects and people in their environment into substitutes for the adult world, to learn and practice social norms, as well as future relationships and activities. Imagination is therefore seen as a 'zone of proximal development', that enables children to connect with the adult world without fully occupying it. Indeed Dovey (1990) argues that ordinary and familiar spaces best promote imaginary play, as these enable a process of transforming the everyday through imagination. In this paper, we will take forward the idea that children's imagination and play is materially grounded (Winnicott, 1971; Keith and Wittaker, 1981; Wilson and Ryan, 2005), and that children use imagination to transform their everyday spaces and make the adult world comprehensible, when negotiating their emotional experiences. As we focus on the embodiment of fear, it is worth first examining the treatment of childhood fear in research.

1.2. Remembering fear in childhood

The framing of the discussion of fear and childhood has often been articulated through the language of a fear of crime and risk to the vulnerability of children (Kitzinger, 1999). Fear is thus located in public space, and is often embodied in the figure of the predatory stranger, particularly in media discourses (Kitzinger, 1999). One response to the