My Stuff
Boys' Snapshots of Their Possessions and How They Use Things to Play and Bond

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In this excerpt from the author's new book *Boys Will See Boys: Folklore, Friendships, and Emotions in Boyhood Snapshots* (University Press of Mississippi, 2026), he discusses how boys use objects more often than words to bond with others in their friendship group. Objects can range from folk toys to commercial toys, from bicycles to cards. He also details how snapshots taken by boys in their play world reveal their bonding but also their risky behavior, such as play with knives and guns, all away from the surveillance of adults. **Key words**: boys; adolescence; material culture; pets; toys

Introduction

Adult photographs of children and adolescents at play has a long history, but the body of work reproducing and interpreting photographs taken by young people of their own worlds remains slim. Young people perform their identities in public for adults, but when away from the close supervision, they often create private worlds—including worlds of play—very different from the image most adults have of them and often the worlds that would meet with adult disapproval, especially dangerous or "dirty play." The use of vernacular, everyday, amateur photography, of snapshots, to write the social and cultural history of children and adolescents helps open up that world for our eyes and for our understanding of their lives in friendship groups. Especially using snapshots enshrines the study of the everyday lives of boys and of young men in groups, largely because boys and men tend to communicate and bond with their bodies rather than with their words. These snapshots present to the adult studying them surprises and puzzles that need interpretation. An interpretation of the meaning of a snapshot is always tentative, a best guess, a hunch aided by what

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we learn from history and from other disciplines about boys' biological nature and their second nature, their socialization.

Our Stuff

The late stand-up comic, George Carlin, performed in the genre called "observational comedy," featuring routines based not on jokes but on humorous observations about the absurdities of our everyday lives. His ninth comedy album, *A Place for My Stuff* (1981), includes this fragment from one of his observations about "my stuff": "That's all I want, that's all you need in life, is a little place for your stuff, ya know? I can see it on your table, everybody's got a little place for their stuff. This is my stuff, that's your stuff, that'll be his stuff over there. That's all you need in life, a little place for your stuff."

The routines from talented observational comedians are full of insights worthy of a sociologist or anthropologist or psychologist. If a goal of anthropology is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, then good observational comedy amounts to good ethnography, examining every day, taken-for-granted reality and understanding how cultural is that so-called common sense. Carlin's "A Place for My Stuff" routine is prescient for my purposes here, as he draws attention to the centrality of "our stuff" in defining us to ourselves and to others.

Around 2001 I had a student, Jesse Gelwicks, who wanted to do his senior honors thesis in American studies on his experiences working in a group home for boys, one very much like the one Horan (1988) worked in and wrote about. In both cases, Horan's in New Jersey and Gelwicks's in Northern California, the group homes housed a relatively small number of "at risk" boys and served as an alternative to incarcerating them or to placing each alone in foster care. The counselors working with them tended to be college-aged men with an interest in the sort of social work with boys the homes represented.

Gelwicks had read Horan's work and other ethnographies of children, so much of his resulting senior thesis and a published paper (Gelwicks 2002) described and analyzed the culture of the group home, paying attention to the fact that there really were three cultures in the home—the folk culture the boys created for themselves, the staff culture, and the culture that emerged at the borders between the boy culture and the staff culture. Gelwicks sought to add another ethnographic method Horan had not used—photo elicitation with snap-

shots taken by the boys (and approved by the supervisor of the home). Gelwicks bought each of the seven boys a disposable camera. "I explained the project to the boys in short information sessions right before giving them the disposable cameras," he writes. "They were told to focus on 'stuff,' not people, but they could include people as they saw fit. I asked them to take photographs of the things they felt were important to them" (Gelwicks 2002, 78). He gave them no other instructions about the pictures to take, and when a boy finished the roll of film in the camera, he returned it to Gelwicks to have developed. Gelwicks had two sets of prints made from each roll. One set he put into a small album for the boy to keep, and the other set he kept himself. He would sit down with a boy and have the boy show him the snapshots and talk about them.

Gelwicks asked the boys to take snapshots of the stuff that was important to them. He believed that his constant observation (over eleven months) provided lots of evidence of how the boys managed their social relations with each other and with staff members. His (and my) hope was that a focus on the things, the objects important to each boy, would provide new insights into how each boy negotiated his very difficult social and psychological set of circumstances in everyday life.

Horan observed that boys in the home he studied used objects as props for negotiating relationships. Having some objects (like cigarettes) and sharing or not sharing these objects with others turned out to be crucial gestures in negotiating the power relations within the boys' folk culture, a culture in which potential violence between the boys remained a possibility. Gelwicks was eager to see how the boys in his group home used their few possessions to manage their social relationships, including their place in the power hierarchy. Much as Sapolsky (1997) notes about the tendency of male primates in groups to establish power hierarchies, boys find it comfortable to know their individual places in the power hierarchy of the friendship group.

Gelwicks found a lot of diversity in the objects the boys chose to photograph, from a dead rat to toys and bicycles and posters on the walls of the boys' rooms. One particular case echoes Horan's findings. One boy, Nicholas (Gelwicks's study does not use real names), took a picture of another boy's, Jake's, Pokémon Gameboy. Gelwicks observes that Jake had taken Nicholas under his wing when Nicholas arrived at the home. "For Nicholas," writes Gelwicks, "the game may have had a double importance; it is fun to play, everyone likes playing it, and it also symbolizes his friendship or at least connection with Jake, the most powerful boy in the house" (Gelwicks 2002, 81). Other photographs

by boys confirmed for Gelwicks that many boys used objects to cement their friendship with Jake, the "strongest and toughest" boy in the home. Some of the boys also took pictures of themselves or had another take pictures and would carry the self-portraits with them most of the time, proof that they exist (Gelwicks 2002, 83).

In these few examples lie some of the themes key in the functions of stuff in the snapshots boys take of boys. They take snapshots of objects meaningful to them, but also of objects they see as crucial in negotiating relationships, even friendships, within the group. Much of the folklore of boys in their friendship groups can be understood by looking at how they play with power (Mechling 1986). And we should not miss the point in both the Gelwicks and Horan ethnographies that using objects to exercise power helps avoid the use of force, violence, within the group.

Of course, the circumstances creating the snapshots I present and analyze here differ from the common uses of photo elicitation used by folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, social workers, and other who employ the method to elicit testimony from children about their lives. Cindy Clark (1999) has relied on the method several times in her work with children and teens, and she adopts the term "autodriving" (used in marketing research) to describe her work. In fact, autodriving (letting the person who is being interviewed "drive" the interview) with photographs is a method commonly found in medical interviews, especially with children.

The snapshots in this article were not taken by boys at the direction of an adult with power, implicit or explicit, over them. Nor is it likely that the boy photographer showed the snapshots to a parent or other adult, nor discussed them with the adults. Without verbal testimony about the motives and meanings from the boys taking these snapshots and appearing in them, we are forced to construct the motives and meanings ourselves. Folklorists and other scholars interested in the everyday lives of children have turned to their material culture for evidence, so let us start there.

Boys' Things

Observational evidence, confirmed by the photographic record of the everyday lives of boys, suggests that we can lump boys' things, the material objects in their world, into two categories: commercial toys and folk toys, the second

category encompassing playthings, by which I mean material objects we would not normally think of as toys, but boys play with them.

A considerable amount of scholarship exists on commercial toys (e.g., Sutton-Smith 1986; Kline 1993; Cross 1997), though most of the historians and social scientists who write about commercial toys use the toys as evidence of larger cultural practices and patterns, including topics ranging from gift-giving traditions to the reification of gender in the toys to the linkage between television programming for children and toys themed to the television stories. The history of advertising toys, for example, provides clues to historical changes in adult thinking about children, but evidence of adults' ideas about children (including the nature of boys) is not evidence of the behavior of boys or their inner states, any more than adult photographs of children are evidence of how children experience their worlds.

The solution to the problem of understanding what commercial toys mean to boys is to observe directly how boys play with toys or—as Sutton-Smith (1986) does—collect from children their stories about toys. I most trust those ethnographic observations of play with toys from social scientists in what they would call "natural settings," not settings (e.g., classrooms, social science laboratories, lab schools) created by and surveilled by adults, but settings in which the boys escape the adult control of their world and experience agency in their play and social interactions. Such ethnographic studies are pretty rare because the presence of an adult researcher simply brings us back to the classic experimenter effect—how do we know whether or not the children are behaving a certain way in response to the presence of authority figures? As I have argued before, visual autoethnography might be a solution to the problem.

Understanding how boys play with commercial toys in natural settings tests the truth of an idea widely held by adults—namely, that children were more imaginative and creative in their play in the past, especially with folk toys, and that the advent of machine-made, commercial toys has harmed young creativity and imagination.

Those of us who have studied boys in their natural settings know this fear of machine-age modernity's destroying childhood is simply another form of moral panic fueled by adult anxieties about the effects of modernity on their own prospects of living authentically. Boys understand that the commercial toys come with an adult-approved range of uses, but when adults are not present boys often play with commercial toys in ways adults would not approve. For example, in my essay on play with guns (Mechling 2008b), I came across examples of

boys' creative solutions to adults' banning play with toy guns. No toy guns at preschool? Fine, we'll make guns out of the LEGO blocks. Sometimes boys actually destroy toys while playing with them, as in playing war. I have heard stories about unauthorized use of toy chemistry sets, magnifying glasses (e.g., burning ants), and microscopes. In one *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip Calvin builds a city, "Tokyo," in the sandbox and then imagines he is Godzilla destroying Tokyo. (Bill Watterson's understanding of boys, as evidenced in his *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip, rivals the understanding by scholars who study boys.)

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence of forbidden play by boys with commercial toys, evidence that boys can be as imaginative and creative with machine-made toys as with other things they play with. The problem for this study is that boys are not very likely to record the forbidden play in snapshots. One exception is play with toy guns, real guns, and knives, which I discuss later in this article.

My guess is that parents take most of the snapshots of boys with commercial toys. Christmas and birthdays are among the occasions for adults' taking snapshots of boys and their commercial toys. Adults often might photograph boys playing with their toys (riding a bike, playing with toy soldiers, and so on), but these snapshots are evidence of the memories the adults want of the boys' childhoods. When boys play with their toys, they usually are not stopping to take snapshots of the play.

Folklorists and others who study the everyday lives of children and youth often focus on objects found or made by boys as opposed to commercially manufactured toys. Just as girls fashion toy dolls from found objects, so boys fashion toys that replicate objects in their lives, including commercial toys (e.g., found objects transformed into trucks or trains or boats). In an important essay on the material folk culture of children, Bronner (1995) begins with a long passage from Mergen (1982, 121–22) about a piece of stiff wire Mergen found as a child. He named the wire and it was a favorite plaything for years. Bronner discusses a wide range of found objects children turn into playthings, including sand and rocks (see also Mechling 2008a, 2016b).

The sticks in the hands of four boys in figure 1, which I discuss for the presence of pocket knives in the snapshots, show us how readily boys turn sticks into playthings, including play swords and play guns (Mechling 2008b). Children and adolescents also play with food, including gross play and foodfights out of the eyesight of disapproving adults (Mechling 2000).

Even commercial toys can become material folk culture if we shift our

Figure 1

attention from the object itself to how the young person uses the object. And that brings us back to the original lesson from Gelwicks and Horan—namely, that boys use material objects both as props in their construction and performance of their identity and as useful tools in negotiating friendships and power relationships in the male hierarchy of the small group.

Playing with Rope

My thinking through the many ways boys play with sand and mud (Mechling 2016) led me to consider boys' play with another everyday object—rope. Jump rope comes to mind as a plaything that is both a commercial toy and a folk toy, but jumping rope is primarily a genre of the play of girls. Boys' play with rope tends to be more risky or combative, and we do have some snapshot evidence of these forms of rope play.

Boys like to play in ways that defy gravity. One genre of play in this mode is climbing things, as in figure 2. Boys also climb up ropes (figure 3) and climb things with the assistance of rope, as in rock climbing. Boys often use their bod-

Figure 2

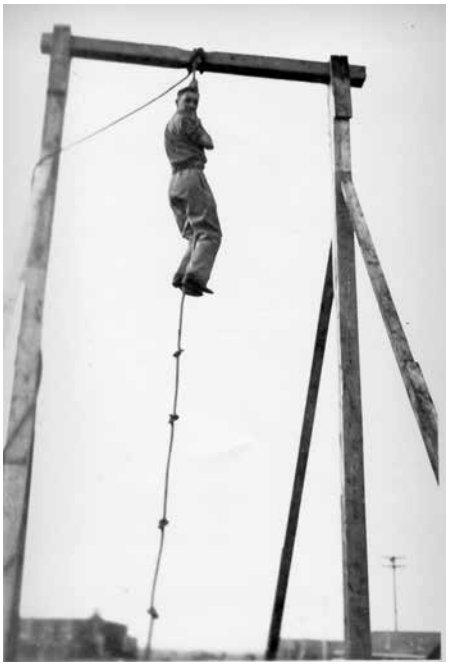

Figure 3

Figure 4

ies to create human pyramids, which also is another genre of play in which boys defy gravity by climbing, in that case climbing on each other.

One pleasure of climbing lies in the potential of falling. Risky play is exciting because it prompts the body to begin dumping into the blood the same hormones associated with the fight-freeze-or-flight instinct (principally adrenaline and noradrenaline). Another pleasure of climbing lies in the changed perspective from high places. From my own experience as a teen I know that climbing onto your house's roof transforms a familiar landscape into an unfamiliar, uncanny one (see Freud 1919).

The boy in figure 4 hangs from a rope, which, in turn, is looped over a tree branch to suspend a tire for swinging, a classic folk toy. Older boys often will tie a rope high on a tree on the bank of a river or lake and use the rope to swing out over the water to drop into the water from a substantial height.

Swinging is one of those genres of play that the play theorist Roger Caillois names *ilinx*, "the Greek term for whirlpool, from which is also derived the Greek word for vertigo (*ilingis*)" (Caillois [1961] 2001, 24). Unlike his other three categories of games—*agon* (competitive, combative), *alea* (chance-based), and

Figure 5

mimicry—play relying on *ilinx* can be played alone and derives its pleasure from the experience of dizziness, vertigo. Play and games in this category "consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perceptions and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness" (Caillois [1961] 2001, 23). Caillois's wonderful phrase "voluptuous panic" tells us why this sort of play is so seductive for young people.

Tug-of-war (TOW) is one of those folk games with rope that begins when the boys are young, which is why I chose figure 5. Elsewhere (Mechling 2023) I have devoted an article entirely to TOW, and the reader can see there many more snapshots, most taken by boys at summer camps or by boys participating in traditional college scraps and contests between classes, often played in mud. The game of TOW actually entered the modern Olympic games in 1900 but was eliminated in 1920, and the Tug of War International Federation (TWIF, founded in 1999) sponsors regular competitions and helps the effort to reinstate the game in the Olympics (Tug of War Association, n.d.). My interest here is in the folk versions of TOW as played by boys, sometimes in the view of adults and sometimes not.

I do not reproduce here my analysis (Mechling 2023) of the meanings of the game and what I take to be the elements of pleasure experienced by playing

TOW. Although girls and women do play TOW, even as documented in snapshots, I will say that boys are especially drawn to play the game as a contest of strength, which is very important to young men. The physical exertion of playing the game causes a flood of hormones in the body, including the hormones (e.g., endorphins, dopamine) that target the pleasure centers in the brain. Another feature of the game permits young men in the friendship group to sort themselves. Again, Sapolsky (1997) and other primatologists observe that adolescent male primates come to know their rank in the group, which provides security and comfort. Human male adolescents sort themselves in their friendship groups on a number of criteria, which might include physical strength, height, intelligence, humor, and wealth (as evidence by possessions, things again). Lining up along a rope for a game of TOW makes visible for each boy his place in the group, just as building human pyramids sorts the boys by size and strength (see also Mechling 2021).

I have mentioned that many of the games boys play and record in snapshots involve mud. I could reproduce here any number of such snapshots. Boys generally like to get dirty. It is notable that games of TOW so often involve pulling the opposing players into mud. My essay on sand play (Mechling 2016) explores some of the social and psychological meanings of play in mud, and my essay

Figure 6

on TOW (Mechling 2023) speculates on the pleasure a team of male players might enjoy when they pull another male team into mud, thereby infantalizing the other males and, because gender is coded in American culture, feminizing them through the infantilization.

I include figure 6 as one of the very few snapshots I have of the darker side of play with rope, in this case play with the hangman's noose. This snapshot is more formally posed by American soldiers of World War I vintage, and I easily could use it as an example of hazing. I include it here because in my long experience with the Boy Scouts, I know that once boys are given rope and taught to tie useful knots, they start playing with the rope, most notably creating the hangman's noose and sometimes simply tying up each other. Doubtless they know the hangman's noose from popular culture images, and their fascination with the noose suggests an adolescent fascination with death.

The Theory of Things

George Carlin offers us something of a folk theory of "stuff," but scholars from several disciplines also have theorized about the meanings of things in our everyday lives. Those scholars offer some useful ideas as we consider the role of objects, things, material culture in the lives of boys and young men.

Developmental psychologists, such as Piaget, have formulated theories of the ways infants and young children relate to objects in their environment, but parents understand even without the theories that for comfort infants attach themselves to objects, including blankets and stuffed animals. The British pediatrician and child psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott formulated his idea of the "transitional object" in a 1951 paper and later elaborated (Winnicott 1971). At its core lies the notion that between ages four and twelve months an infant becomes emotionally attached to an object, which attachment accomplishes a few things, including a transition from the infant's mother as the primary object of attachment to other objects not the mother. Winnicott called the transitional object the "first not-me possession," which points us to an understanding of the role of objects in the creation and performance of self as a child matures.

Perhaps because Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton work out of the same school of philosophy as I do—American Pragmatism—I am partial to their book *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (1981). An added strength in their approach is that they interviewed over three

hundred children and adults in eighty-two families in their homes about the meanings of the domestic objects with which they surround themselves (1981, x). American Pragmatism (especially the versions elaborated by George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, building on Charles Peirce and William James) provides the theoretical approach to how people make meaning in the world, and the ethnographic material, the interviews, provide the evidence for a nuanced understanding of the meaning of specific material objects to people in their homes.

I recommend the book to anyone interested in material culture, but I can summarize here their most important ideas with a series of bullet points:

- Meaning is created through a process of "cultivation," an "active process of interpretation oriented toward goals" (xi). (This is a fundamental premise of pragmatism, introduced by William James).
- Meaning rests on intentions or motives (5).
- Socialization focuses the individual's attention to some experiences over others (7).
- As symbols, things have the power to evoke emotions and feelings, an important element in the emergence of self-consciousness (21). Objects can also play a role in the young person's "control of impulses and emotions" (117).
- Things can be "carriers of repressed desires," which suggests the need for an understanding of psychic processes (22).
- Objects are symbols of power, including "magical" power (26).
- Objects can be symbols of status (29).
- Objects can be symbols of what Durkheim calls sociability, social integration beyond the individual (33).
- In early childhood objects are important means for establishing a sense of self and agency (object relations theory), but as a child matures into adolescence, objects take on additional importance in "shifting the center of the self from one's own actions to one's position in a network of enduring relationships," an evolution mapped by Erik Erikson ([1950] 1963, 1968) in his models of stages of life (101).
- Experiences with objects always have an aesthetic component, something most obvious with artistic objects but also inherent in experiences with familiar and everyday objects (176–77). The pleasure of the aesthetic experience with an object often is due to its intrinsic qualities, not just the fact that it represents something else (177).

- While one's understanding of the meaning of an object might be formed somewhat by what Dewey calls recognition, our ability to understand an experience in terms of previous experiences, sometimes we take an "active, critical" approach to understanding the meanings of an object to the extent that the intrinsic qualities of the object "may modify previously formed habits or interpretive associations," a process Dewey calls perception (179–81).
- Intense, focused, attentive interaction with an object can induce a state of psychic flow, which amounts to a state of consciousness apart from everyday reality (186–87).

This set of bullet points does not do justice to the details of the ideas and examples of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, but I think these points alert us to the nature of a boy's experience with things he considers meaningful in his world, things meaningful enough that he and his buddies photographed the things and kept the snapshots.

We are ready now to examine a set of snapshots of boys and their stuff.

Boys' Bedrooms

Based on his archaeological work in colonial American sites, Deetz (1977) argues that from the design of interior space in homes we can see material evidence of the emergence of the notion of privacy when parents began sleeping apart from their children and some children began to have private bedrooms. Reid's (2017) historical analysis of the emergence of the notion of a separate bedroom for adolescents sees 1900 as a turning point in American thought about teen bedrooms, as psychologists began to give advice to parents about how to respond to the desire of adolescents to have control over their own space. That date also corresponds to the growing disposable income teens could use as consumers decorating their bedrooms. Reid notes that the nineteenth century notion about gender and youth was that girls spent time in the bedroom while boys spent time outside. The notion that boys would spend much time in their bedrooms was new to the twentieth century, as was the new scientific notion that boys had emotional lives not wholly dissimilar from those of girls (Hall 1904). Adults came to realize that boys needed the privacy of their bedrooms as a refuge from "serious personal and emotional turmoil" (Reid 2017, 61).

In a chapter titled "The Home as Symbolic Environment," Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) report from their interviews with families that children "tended to feel most at home in their own bedrooms," a not-so-surprising observation (135). "Children's special objects are most often found in their bedrooms" (137), but the importance to children of the bedroom as an inner sanctum in the home lies beyond the fact that their most treasured, most meaningful special objects are there. "For children, it [their bedroom] is a private area that gives a greater feeling of control over the activities and objects than other rooms and thus is a place where autonomy itself can be cultivated by 'dialogues' with the self, mediated by cherished possessions" (137).

I have not come across many snapshots of boys in their bedrooms at home.

Figure 7

Salinger's (1995) photographic look at teens in their bedrooms offers no analysis of the variety of bedrooms, though the brief snippets of teen testimony quoted by Salinger do reinforce the point that American teens tend to see their bedrooms as refuges from adult surveillance and control. Twitchell's (2006) very interesting look at "where men hide," with photographs by Ken Ross, reminds us that a boy's desire for a refuge away from girls does not vanish in adulthood for many men, but both the Twitchell book and the Salinger book feature photographs taken by adults.

Figure 7 is one of the few snapshots I have of a boy in his bedroom, though many of the snapshots of boys with their toys are set in a bedroom, snapshots most likely taken by adults. I feel fairly confident that figure 7 was not taken by a parent, as that would be intolerable for the boy, so I think it is likely that this snapshot was taken by a sibling or friend. We see only a bit of the way the boy chose to decorate his room.

Camp Tents and Cabins

An exception to the observation that I have seen few snapshots of boys by boys in their bedrooms is the body of snapshots taken in bedrooms away from home, either in a tent on a camping trip (most of the snapshots I have in that genre are of Boy Scouts) or in a cabin at a commercial summer camp where traditionally there are separate cabins for the girls and boys. Tents and cabins are not the private spaces boys enjoy in their bedrooms at home, and many of the snapshots of these camp spaces do not reveal much about the boys. The professional photographer Barbara Morgan (1951) has a nice photo essay on boys at summer camp, but what of snapshots from camp by boys of boys? Two books that feature snapshots of boys taken by boys at summer camp are Andy Sweet's (2020), mostly his photos with little commentary, and *Camp Camp* by Bennett and Shell (2008). For a folklorist's purposes, the Bennett and Shell book has a great deal of commentary to accompany the snapshots provided by former campers. Bennett and Shell devote a chapter called "Bad Boys" to focusing on the "boys' bunk," and this chapter has many examples—both snapshots and testimony—of the pranks and play folklorists find in the adolescent friendship group. Mirroring a central idea I use here, the authors devote three pages to a list and description of "20 Acts of Violence that Say 'I love you,'" the many aggressive ways boys torture each other in the boys' cabin when adults are not present (52–54).

Figure 8

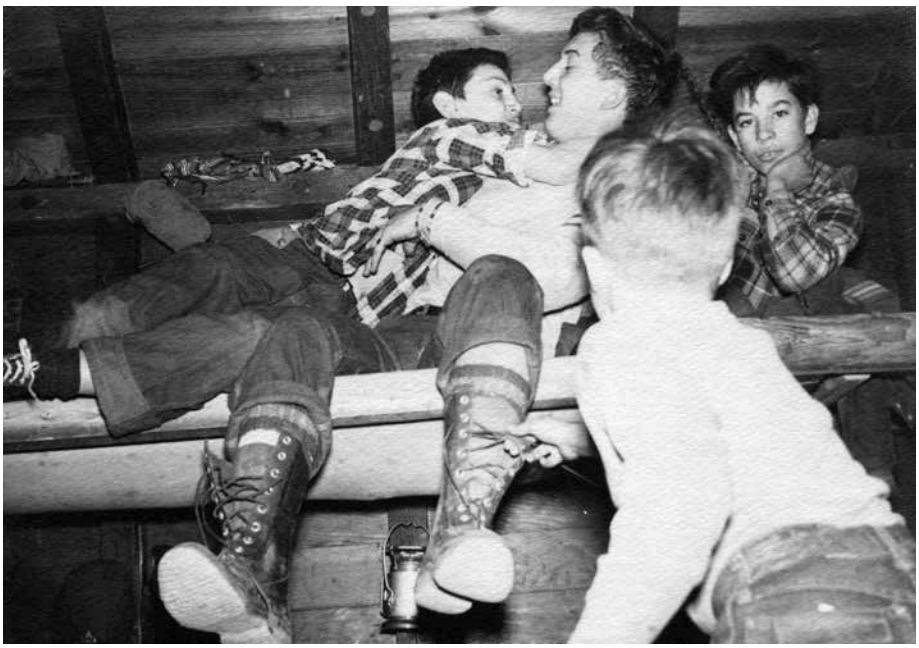

Figure 9

What snapshots I do have of boys enjoying some camp time away from adult surveillance are interesting because of the playful wrestling in some, like figures 8 and 9. I include them to show that even in a total institution (Goffman 1961; Mechling 2019c) that seeks to monitor and control the lives of the campers, boys find space away from adult surveillance to goof off and otherwise enjoy each other's company.

Bicycles and Cars

One of the boys studied by Gelwicks proudly showed my student the photograph of his bicycle, and that object is a favorite for boys' snapshots of their stuff.

Figure 10 attracted my attention for a few reasons. At the outset, I was drawn to the visual composition of the photograph, which I think likely has been taken by another boy. This amateur photograph has a modernist aesthetic, probably quite by accident, though some young photographers have very talented eyes. The lines, the angles of the composition resemble famous modernist art and documentary photographs. I also like the fact that two objects important to boys—a bicycle and a car—are at the center of the snapshot. The snapshot captures a particular moment as the boy negotiates getting through a gate.

Figure 11 is of interest because in this snapshot the boy and his bicycle are the center of attention, but the pet dog shares the stage with the bicycle as an object worth our notice. It might seem strange to call a pet dog an object or a thing, and I have made the case elsewhere for a boy's dog as his "chum." Attachment to things, including bikes and pets, can trigger even love. Let us consider the meanings of the bicycles in so many of the boys' snapshots.

Following Dewey (1934), we certainly should begin with the recognition that riding a bike is fun, that a boy might consider a bicycle a thing of beauty, especially when brand new and discovered beside the Christmas tree. Its intrinsic quality taps an aesthetic response. It is in riding the bicycle, however, that a boy experiences the pleasure of the object. Understanding this point requires us to characterize the phenomenology of the experience of riding a bike.

To begin with, we have to learn how to ride a bike. Younger children might have their first experience with the more stable tricycle, and a significant moment in a child's life is graduating from a tricycle to a bicycle, even if that transition is eased by the temporary presence of training wheels to make the bike more stable and easy to ride. In short, the first bike signals a transition from one

Figure 10

Figure 11

stage of childhood to another, from an immature stage to a mature one. And the pleasure of finally mastering the balance necessary for successful bike riding is precisely that—the pleasure in mastery.

What makes riding a bike "a consummatory experience" (in Dewey's language) is the phenomenological experience of riding. This begins at the neurological and physiological level. Like other forms of vigorous exercise, cycling releases a set of hormones, "a pleasurable cocktail of norepinephrine, dopamine, endorphins, anandamide, and serotonin," most of which flood the pleasure center of the brain (Hunt 2018). Cycling stimulates blood flow, "increasing the brain's capacity to grow, function, and repair itself" (Hunt 2018). This is not surprising, as cycling is not just physical exercise but requires complex coordination between the body and the mind, including balance. Scientists have also discovered the benefits of cycling for emotional health: "Cycling floods our bodies with powerful neurotransmitters, the very same chemical compounds targeted by anti-anxiety and anti-depression medications" (Hunt 2018).

The phenomenological fun of cycling goes beyond the neurophysiology and endocrinology. Recall that the play theorist Roger Caillois ([1961]2001) divides play and game into four basic sorts, one of which he calls *ilinx*, Greek for "whirlpool," which describes well the pleasure of vertigo we find in many forms of play and games. We can recognize that cycling and the ever-changing sense of balance riding a bike resembles *ilinx*. Moreover, just as Paul Bouissac (1976), in his cultural study of the circus, notes that some acts defy gravity, holding off through skill the possibility of falling, riding a bike presents the same uncertain defiance of gravity.

That covers the biological, emotional, and mental pleasure of riding a bike, but there is more. A bike represents mobility, and escape from home, and that escape from adult authority and surveillance is very attractive to some adolescents. I have a personal story to illustrate this point. When I was an early adolescent, my Boy Scout troop met on Friday nights at a clubhouse about three miles from my home in Miami Beach. My parents trusted me to be able to ride my bike safely through the suburban neighborhood at night, both going and coming home a few hours later. This was in the late 1950s, admittedly before parents and other adults worked up a moral panic over stranger danger (e.g., child abductions), but I had no fear, only the exhilaration of riding my bike at night and taking control of my life. Over the years, when men learned of my scholarly work on the Boy Scouts, they often said that one of the attractions of the organization was that a scout meeting was the first occasion to have a legitimate reason to be away from home during the night. The mobility of a bicycle (and I

Figure 12

do no doubt many of those boys rode their bikes to the Boy Scout troop meetings) represented freedom and autonomy, even briefly, from adult supervision, control, and surveillance.

But there is still more. A child can use a bike to help manage social relations and friendships. Kids give each other rides on their bikes (figure 12); kids sometimes lend their bikes to others, a sign of trust; and sometimes kids refuse to share a bike ride or use of their bike, a power move with social and emotional implications.

Little wonder, then, that boys consider their bicycles as extremely important things in their social world, things worth photographing.

Directing our attention back to figure 10, let us shift our gaze from the bicycle to the car in the photo. There is no way to know if the car in that photo belongs to the boy with the bicycle, but there is little doubt in my mind that the boys in figures 13 and 14 are standing in front of cars that are theirs in some way, even if owned by parents. Most interesting in those two snapshots are the poses assumed by the boys for the photograph. Part of the competent performance of masculinity in American culture is knowing how to assume the proper male poses. Goffman's book, *Gender Advertisements* (1976), for example, illustrates

Figure 13

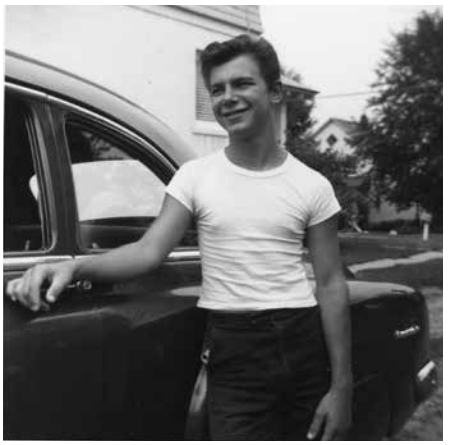

Figure 14

many of these poses, most with women. The boy in figure 13 assumes a classic male pose, thumbs in jeans pockets and hands flared, framing his genitals. The teen boy in figure 14 also assumes a classic male pose, his hand on the car, his loving gaze at the car, and his body language strongly resembling the poses

Figure 15

Goffman (1976) reads as male ownership of the female. And I hardly need add here that young men often talk about their cars as female, so it is not surprising that the young men touch their cars in ways similar to the ways they might pose with a girlfriend.

Figure 15 attracts our attention because we see in this snapshot the affectionate touching between three young men of the sort Ibson (2007) writes about. The car is what brings them together.

Leaving the larger things in boys' lives—from bedrooms to bikes and cars—let me turn now to smaller objects often photographed by boys.

Toy Guns and Real Guns

Guns, both toy guns and real guns, appear in several snapshots of boys by boys and make a useful case study of boys' uses of objects to display power. Elsewhere (Mechling 2008b) I have written at length about play with guns, mostly boys' play with guns. Here I make a few key points explaining why and how guns become boys' special objects, things so special that boys keep snapshots

Figure 16

of themselves with their guns.

I have many snapshots of boys with toy guns and real guns (Mechling 2004), but figure 16 is a rich enough example that I can make my points with that image before us.

I feel fairly certain that this snapshot was taken by a boy, as I cannot imagine most adults would approve of the gun play pictured here. American boys seem especially drawn to play with guns. If we begin with the observation from the evolutionary psychologists that pubescent and adolescent boys are attracted to the power of magical objects that have an effect at a distance (tapping the child's desire for omnipotence), then it is a small step to observe that in American history guns have been part of the cultural mythologies featuring them as just such magical objects (e.g., Slotkin 1992).

Boys know that guns are both forbidden and permitted. Boys in hunting families are taught how to use guns safely and appropriately (Mechling 2004), and both the National Rifle Association and the Boy Scouts of America work hard to domesticate rifle shooting as good, clean, family fun (Mechling 2014a). Parents' and other adults' taking snapshots of boys holding long guns—Christ-

mas morning snapshots, hunting trip snapshots, snapshots at organized target-shooting events, and so on—conveys to boys that they can play with guns under adult supervision. It is in snapshots like figure 16 that boys capture forbidden play with guns, play that fuses the cultural approval of guns with the young man's pleasure in feeling the full power of the gun when not under adult supervision.

These snapshots of forbidden gun play send us looking to ideas from depth psychology to understand what is so attractive in playing with guns in ways of which adults would disapprove. For example, psychoanalysts have long noted adolescent boys' fascination with death (e.g., Winnicott 1971). That young men should contemplate their own deaths and the deaths of others seems paradoxical, given the parallel belief by young men that they are immortal. Yet, from the psychoanalytic point of view, the adolescent boy's hyper awareness of his changing body focuses his attention on the vulnerability of the body (Lyons 2004). The famous funeral scene in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer,* in which Huck and Tom, hiding in the rafters, observe people at their own funeral, captures this adolescent fascination with death. But so do the numerous first-person shooter (FPS) games played on computers and video game systems, games that feature not only death by guns but also "resurrection" with multiple lives (see the discussion of FPS video games playing by warriors in Wallis and Mechling 2019).

Depth psychology also draws our attention to the similarity of shooting guns to sexual discharge. As in many things, we can look to the everyday folk speech of boys and men to confirm this symbolic equivalence between the gun and the penis, and between shooting a gun and shooting semen. Grossman and Christensen (2008) make this point directly, using the words of soldiers to describe the sexual excitement of shooting long rifles, especially automatic weapons, and the common use of the word "shooting" in folk speech to describe ejaculation.

These meanings of playing with both real and toy guns lie in the unconscious of both prepubescent and adolescent boys, though an adolescent boy also might be able to articulate the resemblance between discharging a long rifle and ejaculating. After all, men as young as seventeen are in the military and expressed such feelings to Grossman.

Knives and Other Sharp Objects

Every one of the five summers from 2007 through 2011 that I attended Boy Scout camp with our younger grandson, I bought him at his urging a new pocketknife

at the camp trading post. The two camps (one in the mountains of Northern California, the other on Santa Catalina Island in Southern California) were savvy, knowing from experience that teen boys will buy knives. Every boy at scout camp must earn his Totin' Chip, a card certifying that he has passed a test of knowledge and techniques for the safe handling of knives and axes. There are legitimate functional and artistic uses of knives in camp, and earning the Woodworking and Pioneering merit badges teaches boys these uses. At the same time, my own observation at these camps showed me that boys take an intrinsic pleasure in carrying and using a knife. A common activity by boys is to work incessantly at sharpening a stick, not for any practical or artistic use, but purely for the pleasure of slicing away curls of wood.

Folklorist Simon Bronner argues in *Chain Carvers* (1985), based on his fieldwork and interviews with men who carve elaborate wooden figures and toys for pleasure, that a boy's first knife is a signal of responsible adulthood (and when he receives it varies according to several factors, including rural or urban residence, social class, and ethnicity). Parents and other adults trust a boy when they give him a knife and expect him to use it safely and responsibly. Bronner also captures the pleasure and pride these men enjoy carving small objects with knives. Thinking about my own experience as a scout and then as an adult volunteer with my grandson's scout troop, I asked Bronner if his adult male informants had anything to say about their attraction to knives when they were boys. Most of his informants lived in rural areas, so even as boys they understood that a knife is a useful tool, perhaps something to be carried at all times in a sheath looped to a belt. The men added, though, that the boy's first knife had a symbolic value, attesting to the boy's maturity, certifying that he was a responsible person who could be trusted to use the knife safely. You can see the pride of ownership in figure 17.

My experience as a boy who had knives and watching boys with knives brings to this discussion a few salient points when I examine snapshots of boys with knives.

First, although there are practical uses for knives while camping, most of the time I saw boys using knives, they were engaged in a simple task of slicing away pieces of wood from a stick to make a sharp point at one end. Figures 1 and 18 catch small groups of boys milling around and playing with knives and sharpened sticks.

Knives play a prominent role in figure 18. I think it is a reasonable guess that a fifth boy took this snapshot. The boy on the left wears an empty knife

Figure 17

sheath on his belt, and he might have loaned his knife to one of the two boys in the middle, both of whom are whittling on sticks. The fourth boy, on the far right, is watching the whittlers, perhaps waiting his turn to work on his stick. For the folklorist, this snapshot is a perfect document of what so interests Bronner (1986, 1995) in his story of children's material culture, namely, the ability of children to make their own folk toys out of found materials.

Everything I have said so far about boys and knives in these snapshots amounts to a thin description of how boys use knives—as tools, as toys, as symbols of power. Boys also play fight with knives and other sharp objects, what I call "deep play."

From experience I know that many readers, scholars, and others interested in the everyday lives of youth reject insights based on depth psychology, especially psychoanalytic theory. These readers can skip the next few paragraphs, but I remain convinced that depth psychology adds insights to understanding the everyday lives of young people, in this case, boys.

In making a complete accounting of the pleasures boys take in handling knives, we should consider the abundant evidence that knives and their longer

Figure 18

kin—bayonets and swords—are symbolic penises. The folklorist Alan Dundes, well known for his psychoanalytic interpretation of folklore, defends his interpretations by pointing out that it is not the psychiatrists or the historians and anthropologists who use depth psychology to see symbolic equivalences, it is the folk themselves as revealed in their folk speech. In the case of the symbolic equivalence of knives and penises, folk speech makes the case. Condoms are called "sheaths," and in my examination of pissing and masculinity elsewhere (Mechling 2014b), I do cite an ethnography that describes how male counselors at a summer camp would duel with their streams of urine putting out the campfire (Goyton 1998).

Puzzling why boys seem to take such pleasure in whittling sticks to have sharp points, I conclude that whittling the stick is a form of masturbation. It turns out that, in fact, "whittling" has a few variations as slang for masturbation, including "whittle the stick" and "whittle the wood" (Sex-Lexus 2016). Moreover, the repetitive nature of the incessant sharpening of the stick also fits the psychoanalytic theory. Of course, pubescent and adolescent boys usually

do not dwell on the symbolic equivalence of the penis and the knife; that is largely unconscious.

The Ways of the Hand

For these concluding thoughts on boys and their stuff I have poached the title of sociologist David Sudnow's book, *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct* (1978), recognizing that the material culture of childhood (including clubhouses, forts, and rafts) involve a boy's hands. That point seems trivial, but the scientists who study the brain and the mind draw attention to the coevolution of our brains and hands. Wilson's *The Hand* (1998) details this idea—our hands teach the brain as much as the brain teaches the hand. And Bronner (2019) in an unsurprising expression of his longtime study of material culture, lately has come back to asserting the primacy of the "handiness" of tradition (37).

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