More than just a bracelet: the use of material symbolism to communicate love

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Abstract

There is growing recognition of the place of love in residential care for children (Smith, 2009). This paper is a critical analysis of a range of existing research on residential child care as well as studies of material culture and of care relationships more broadly. It argues that, despite increasing regulation and surveillance, adults and children find ways to show and feel love in the context of residential care. Whilst love may be regarded as something to be avoided or indeed prohibited in an adult/child care setting these deep bonds find expression in the everyday life of the children's home. By looking at love in this embodied way, the 'realness' of material things to assert connection and recognition of love (Layne, 2000) is examined. As Gorenstein (1996, p.8) suggests 'objects…[are] the perfect vehicles for conveying themes that are not commonly accepted in a community'. The paper emphasises the recognition of these symbolic and metaphorical forms of communication in practice.

Keywords

Children, material culture, ethics of care

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Introduction

As this special edition illustrates, there is growing debate concerning the place of love in residential care for children (Smith, 2009). Like those working in other forms of childcare provision, from nurseries to high schools, relationships between paid professionals and children are under increasing scrutiny and critique (Lynch, Baker, & Lyons, 2009). What adults should do, feel and think about the children that they look after is complex and enmeshed in the contradictions inherent in both the wider moral panics about risks to children and the emphasis on developmental approaches to children's need for touch, intimacy and close bonds with adults (Piper & Smith, 2003, Emond, Steckley, & Roesch-Marsh, 2016).

How love in an institutional environment is expressed and experienced is perhaps less well understood. This paper explores one potential medium, namely the ways in which those living and working in residential care might use objects and food to show love, connection and belonging, both to those within the care setting as well as to those out with it. The paper argues that these material objects, as symbols or metaphors, afford a vital channel through which adults and children demonstrate and experience love.

The paper begins by outlining the ways in which love between children and 'paid' adults has been conceptualised and understood. It goes on to briefly explore symbolism and material symbolism and the role that these take in communication, internally with the self as well as externally to others and to the world around. Drawing on a number of research projects and practice encounters, the paper presents examples of where symbolic materialism may have been used by children and adults to establish, deepen and communicate love and all its challenges.

What is love in the context of 'professional' care?

Academic writing on love has tended to focus on 'romantic love' the conceptualisation of which relies on a relationship between two people involving physical and emotional intimacy, commitment and, most often in the literature, an element of choice (Wilding, 2003). In theoretical terms, the study of romantic love has been shaped by wider social change. More recently, writers have argued that in Western cultures individuals are in pursuit of what is termed 'pure love' where choice of partner is accompanied by notions of equality, of respect and reciprocal caring (cf. Giddens, 1992). Therefore, what is understood and experienced as love, even in this romantic context, is dynamic and shaped by social, political and philosophical discourses (Worth, Reid & McMillan, 2002).

Similarly, how we understand love between adults and children has changed over time. Love in this domain refers most often to familial love occurring within

what many perceive as the private sphere of family life, away from the scrutiny and surveillance of the public gaze. In the context of the family, feelings of deep love and connection are assumed to exist between parents and their children. Often, these representations of love within families dilute and sanitise what are more likely to be complex, dynamic and multi layered relationships (Beck &Beck-Gernsheim, 2014).

Despite its intimate and private context, how society constructs love between adults and children and what we expect to see from 'loving parents' is a central tenet of child welfare and protection. Arguably, in this context, love is bound up with what are seen as the actions of the 'good enough' parent and with the developmental needs of the child. Over the last thirty years, understandings of this parent-child relationship have come to be dominated by the discourse of attachment theory. Here children require a consistent, available, responsive parent who is able to attune to and notice their needs and to know how to sooth and respond at times of stress or challenge (Howe, 2011). Arguably, this deeply felt, respectful, nurturing response has come to represent an idealised version of parental love. This approach goes on to suggest that an internal working model of the self in relationship with others is developed through this relational process, which acts to guide and shape an individual through future relationships (Howe, 2007).

Many of those involved in research and practice with children refer to how crucial, from a developmental perspective, love and care are (see for example Sutherland, 2007). They argue that by experiencing attuned care, children learn to internalise trust in themselves and in the outer world, they gain a sense of themselves as worthy of love (as 'loveable') and learn what it is to love (Gerhardt, 2015). Love is both a set of actions and of feelings that many believe is learned through experience.

Love between children and adults becomes even more complex when it moves out of the realm of the family and into the context of 'professional' relationships. In many settings where children are looked after away from home there has been a growing paradox held within what is required of the adults providing that care; adults should be professionally knowledgeable and objective, fair and equal in their response to children and at the same time feel a genuine connection with the child and nurture and respond to his/her unique self (Emond et al., 2016). In addition, the practice of the adults has come under increasing scrutiny and evaluation. Indeed, the 'effectiveness' of the care being offered has become something to be measured and which must be shown to create identifiable change (Steckley & Smith 2011).

More often than not, this approach to looking after children away from their family home has been conceptualised as care giving rather than as love. However, like love, caring is also a contested term. Since the feminist critique of caring in the 1970s there has been a rise in a more critical and conceptually

nuanced view of caring (Koggel & Orme, 2010). Noddings (2003, p.24) for example suggests that '….caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference and into the others'. Caring here is not just a feeling but is also an intellectual activity. This suggests that, to care for someone requires action and 'emotional' labour (James, 1989).

Whilst caring for a child in a residential context is encouraged and indeed expected (Milligan & Stevens, 2006), love arouses deep concerns within society when it is used to refer to the relationship between a non-familial adult and a child. This is even more so when that adult has been ascribed care giving responsibilities. By talking about care giving rather than love, professionals are able to identify the component parts of such activities (Gilligan, 1993). This 'doing' of care suggests a one-way experience; the adult doing care to the child rather than care of each other, a reciprocal experience (Tronto, 2010). Thus, these adult care activities can be listed and monitored and can be externally presented as strategic identifiers of 'good care'.

Love, by contrast, suggests something deep and personal, something intimate that cannot be readily controlled or regulated. Indeed, at the core of love is the notion that it is spontaneous, cannot be paid for or commodified (Lynch, 2007). Love suggests touch, affection, deep caring and complexity. Love cannot be switched off at the end of a shift or felt in equal measure for all children.

How then can staff in residential settings meet children's need to experience being loved and cared for deeply by those who look after them whilst at the same time, ensuring that the adults who do this loving are behaving appropriately? Page (2011) argues in her work on early years substitute care that not only is it possible but necessary. She challenges the idea that love should be seen as non-professional or inappropriate, rather she argues that love, and with it the feelings, thoughts and actions of parents and substitute carers about what love might be or look like in the context of the nursery should be brought into the open. Love should feature in the discussion with staff about how the child should be cared for.

Building on Nodding's (2001) claim that most people want to be cared for by people who love them, not by 'paid strangers', Page (2011, 2013) suggests that 'good' care has to have what she refers to as 'professional love' within it. Interestingly, she argues that those mothers in her study who she viewed as secure in their own attachment with their babies were better able to recognise and accept the love between the care giver and the child and were able to give permission for this love to develop (but not too much!).

Page's work poses an interesting point for staff in residential care. In their role, they are living with the experiences of love and care that the children bring with them. These children are liable to be in late childhood or adolescence and, in a Scottish context at least, are likely to have experienced physical, sexual,

emotional abuse or neglect (Kendrick, 2014). Their internal working model of relationships, as mentioned earlier in the paper, may well be dominated by an absence of trust, of reliability, of deep connection and of a sense of being known and understood. Substitute care therefore has to respond to the impact of this in the present as well as how this experience of the self in relationship can be repaired (Emond et al. 2016)

Care givers are in loco parentis and are, as previously stated, required to consider the developmental needs of the child (not just at chronological age but also stage), their recovery, as well as their future relationships. It is highly unlikely that parents of these children will have been involved in the selection of substitute care givers or feel a sense of choice over it, indeed many may be resistant to their child being cared for away from home. Thus, permission to love and be loved is unlikely to be granted from parents or indeed from the organisation itself. The organisation may in fact be structured so as to minimise the 'risk' of loving relationships developing.

In her seminal work on the ways in which organisations seek to avoid the anxiety generated by close bonds, Menzies-Lyth (1988) suggests that the focus on task driven work (the folded linen in the cupboard, the well-kept notes) all fuel the separation of staff and children, acting like buffers to the potential messiness and unregulated emotion that real relationships will generate. More recently, Ruch (2016) has suggested that, in the UK, the government has exacerbated such methods of working not only by limiting funding of care but also stressing the need for 'value for money'. This austerity discourse, she argues, is underpinned by notions of the risk free society where harm or danger to children can be eradicated. Relationships between adults and children, which are loving and reciprocal, pose, from this perspective, significant risk.

What is material symbolism?

Despite this, it would appear that many children and adults living and working in residential care continue to demonstrate a sense of closeness and affection with each other which some would describe as love. Throughout history, children and adults have used ways to communicate and express connection with one another that reaches beyond spoken language. Indeed, the origins of the word 'symbol' in ancient Greek means 'a token of identification', a way in which members of a tribe confirmed their belonging (Stevens, 2002). Symbols can be thought of as physical or material representations of something that can often be considered invisible. McCarthy (2007) states that

> Symbols allude to things that are deeper and beyond words, which are often of the utmost importance (p.10).

The study of material symbolism or material culture recognises the objects which shape an individual's life and hence his/her sense of self (Layne, 2000). Such objects have a value and meaning beyond their basic elements. They also have powerful symbolic and relational meaning. These objects come to stand for or embody something. This attributed meaning is not necessarily consciously known or understood by those involved. Objects can come to stand for inner emotional or psychic state, a sense of connection and belonging or, by contrast, of alienation and isolation. Objects can communicate to others how an individual sees him/herself and the world around. How a person chooses to dress, the car he/she drives, the music he/she listens to or books he/she reads all communicate to the self and those around something about who this person is, where he/she situates his/herself in the social world and how he/she wants (not necessarily consciously) to be perceived and understood (Layne, 2007; Gorenstein, 1996).

Significantly in the context of this paper, the meanings given to these objects are not necessarily known and shared by others on the outside of the group or family nor indeed by all those inside (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Individuals may believe that they are representing themselves in a particular way by means of what they wear or offer to their guests, but the meaning of this may not be recognised or shared by others.

Such noteworthy objects link to a sense of identity and belonging. This is perhaps most well understood and recognised in the study of childhood and adolescence (Yin & Schiphorst, 2009). Young people will often draw on material means to demonstrate their bond with others, to identify or communicate to the external world the identity that they wish to project or to have recognised. Many of the studies of youth cultures have had at the centre of their work the ways in which 'tribes' of young people have symbolically connected with each other and at the same time excluded or separated themselves from the mainstream (Barone, 2016). Historically, this was often done in the clothing or music that engaged with. More recently, symbolic connection may also be evoked by the technologies being employed and the knowledge and skills connected to their use (Brooks, Chester, Smeeton &Spencer, 2016; Griffiths & Machin, 2003).

In these ways, objects come to take on meaning. They become dynamic communicators of something beyond their material elements. This happens in relationship – either between the individual and object, individual, object and other, and finally individual, object and social world. This process relies on more than the object itself but the meaning given to it, how it is shared, noticed, received and responded to (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Whilst this is recognised across the literature on material symbolism, the dynamic and energy laden potential of symbols is most clearly articulated in writings on symbolism in a therapeutic context. As McCarthy (2007) so vividly describes:

> There are symbols and there are symbols. The miniature figures selected by a therapist for his or her office are not really symbols in and of themselves. They are simply miniature figures that have the potential to help children better articulate and explore themselves. Their becoming a symbol, a vehicle of transformation, depends on what happens inside the child as they sit there. A figure of a horse or a herd of horses may be used by a little girl as she struggles to find her power, her true voice. The raw energy of the horses charging through the sand becomes a symbol of what is trying to surface within her and also a catalyst of it. But a moment before, the horse was just a plastic figure on the shelf. Its sudden relevance is based not on the object itself but rather in the child, how she associates with it, what her body does with it and how meaningfully it expresses and even fosters the great upsurge within her that we can growth (pp.30-31).

For those living and working in residential childcare, the idea that children are communicating and expressing themselves in a range of ways beyond spoken language is well known (Garfat, 2004). The extent to which this is explicitly noticed, assessed and recorded is perhaps less well established.

Arguably, objects or symbols allow children and the adults who care for them opportunity to express and share feelings and thoughts of love or tenderness that may be a challenge to expected norms. Gorenstein (1996, p.8) argues that objects are the 'prefect vehicles for conveying themes that are not commonly accepted in a community'. However, love as a feeling and an experience is much more complex than that. It is not simply the love itself that may be perceived as problematic by the external world, it may also be experienced as hugely challenging for those who are feeling it. Symbolic or material communication, allows these feelings to be expressed in a more tempered, less powerful way (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). By 'speaking' through the symbol, McCarthy (2007) argues that the 'raw power' of what is being said is ameliorated.

Material symbolism in objects

There are an unlimited number of objects that adults and young people draw on within residential care to communicate symbolically. Arguably, however there are some objects which feature heavily in the day to day life of the residential unit and which staff and young people, regardless of setting, will recognise as symbolic of what might be considered love. The following sections suggest potential common objects and encourage the consideration of their relevance to the symbolic communication of 'love'.

One of the most everyday symbols of connection and belonging that I have witnessed over both my years in practice and in researching residential care in a

range of countries have been friendship bracelets. These bracelets have their origin in South America where they were used a symbol of connection and bonding. They are made from woven pieces of thread and when completed, are tied around the wrist of the recipient. Traditionally, they are worn until they decay and fall off. Most often, friendship bracelets, as the name suggests, are either made together (with a friend) or made for a specific person. The production of the object, the selection of the threads and the weaving allow the recipient to be held in mind, to transcend physical space in order to be present (at least unconsciously) to the creator of the bracelet. Once given, the bracelet is worn on the body. Again, through the bracelet, the giver is being symbolically connected to the receiver, even when they are not physically together. The bracelet itself, because of its knotted ends, cannot easily be removed. Rather it stays on the wrist day and night becoming weathered and changed over time.

Through the lens of material symbolism it could be suggested that within the context of residential care, friendship bracelets allow children and adults a means of remaining connected when the shift ends. As Andersen, Jacobs & Polazzi (2003) suggest such objects become 'symbolic surrogates of presence'. In addition, they allow the separate public and private worlds of the staff member to be penetrated by the child. They make the child a visible part of the worker's life beyond the time spent in the unit. The intimacy afforded by jewellery (close to the physical body and there during sleep) expresses a powerful sense of connection and belonging. The bracelet can act as a badge of connection to another and can signal a specific relationship to the wider group. Interestingly, this is a modality that staff members have also used. They too have made bracelets with and for particular children allowing the symbolic features outlined above to be communicated to the child.

Many of those working in residential care will also be aware of how children and young people use drawings and other art works to connect with and express feelings. Often art is considered a useful way for adults to communicate and engage with young people (Lefevre, 2008) rather than as a medium through which children themselves are communicating with and engaging adults or other children. As children age (and enter into formal education), they can become more self-conscious and concerned by the judgements of others and art can become less spontaneous or shared (Lefevre, 2001). For young people, this work may start to relate to bands or pop stars or graffiti words or images. Whilst at first glance, these may appear to be copies of words, graphics or images, they often communicate messages about inner states. The use of art to communicate and process the inner self is well established in literature. In residential care, writers such as Winnicott (1971) promoted and encouraged the use of art and play as a means of expression, in this way acting as a third object or medium through which feelings could be explored without necessarily being consciously named. It follows then that love, which by its nature, cannot always readily be

described or rationalised can be demonstrated and expressed in a safer way through art.

Children often produce artwork in the [unconscious] hope that it will be displayed. The display of the work communicates a sense of importance and value. The giving of the work suggests a trust and confidence that the work will be respected and honoured (Lefevre, 2008). Much can be invested in these pieces of paper! For some children, this may the hope that their work might be displayed in another child recipient's bedroom or in their familial home. If given to staff members, children may want the image exhibited in staff spaces (office) or taken home. In this way, the function of the image goes beyond the aesthetic and indeed beyond the communication of internal state. Here, images also get into the private spaces of those to whom they were gifted. The child is physically represented through the image and becomes present in the space.

This sense of trust needed in the recipient of an object is perhaps most acutely demonstrated in the giving of poems or creative writing (Lefevre, 2008). Writing in these forms remains a private act until the child makes the decision to share their work. Bolton (1999) likens the therapeutic and healing act of writing to a gift to the self. This caring for and loving of oneself can also be powerfully explored and measured through symbolic means.

Like artwork, in the sharing of creative writing the child communicates a sense of trust in the recipient that their creation will be respected. Such writings are often of the most intimate and personal nature, and on the occasions that I received them, are often used to communicate (implicitly and explicitly) inner feelings. The treasuring of these types of objects takes on a particular meaning within residential care. Whilst the writing is given as a gift, staff members are also charged with the responsibility of storing and maintaining objects and materials which represent children's life stories (Emond et al. 2016). They are the 'keepers of memories' which will be passed on to others. Children may well lose contact with those adults who cared for them and to whom they gifted these treasures. The dilemma for staff is whether they should just receive such important objects as individuals, or whether the objects should be received and maintained for the 'future adult' that the child will become. The symbolic demonstration of love and care for the child therefore does not just relate to the present but how, on returning to these treasured material objects, that sense of love and care may be re-experienced (Lovatt, 2015).

Material symbolism in food

A more everyday way in which objects carry symbolic meaning in the residential milieu is around food. In relation to love and care, food can be used to demonstrate a deep and genuine sense of knowing and connection and can be a

sensory and visceral way of taking in the care offered by another (McIntosh, Punch, Dorrer, & Emond, 2010).

Love and care is often felt and experienced through the sense of being known by another. Whilst many people can be sharing a living space, the intimacy of knowing the individual food and drink preferences can be a powerful way to actively demonstrate this. In a study conducted by Punch, McIntosh, and Emond (2010) young people and staff showed their intimate knowledge of, and connection with, each other in the detail of tea and coffee preferences. One young person recounted the multiple and nuanced ways in which individual staff members liked to take their tea and coffee, not just in terms of milk and sugar but the amount and the look of the drinks. Others reported knowing which particular cup individual children or staff liked or how they liked special foods to be prepared.

Statements of feelings about particular children or staff could also be made in food practices linked to special occasions. Celebrating and delighting in the achievements of others through food is a feature of many residential units and foster care settings (Emond, McIntosh, & Punch, 2013). Similarly, comfort and nurture at times of difficulty, anxiety or pain can also be offered and expressed between and within children and staff groups through food. Via these offerings, the love and support of others is transferred. Whilst some children and staff undertake the purely physical act of providing food at such times, others activate the symbolic nature of this by knowing what the child or adult likes or needs. Food becomes more than passive sustenance in such relationships rather it transforms into a dynamic and living medium of communicating deep emotion and connection (Emond et al., 2013).

Symbolically, food holds perhaps one of the most powerful means of communicating and expressing love and care. The food that is prepared is literally taken in and ingested by another (Hancock, Simmons, & Whitwell, 1990). Many residential practitioners will have worked with children [and indeed adults] where the trust and acceptance of this has been difficult to establish. Food can often be the site where resistance against the care being offered or a sense of agency in the face of multiple external decisions gets played out (Punch, McIntosh, & Emond, 2012). Food therefore becomes the vehicle to both give and receive love and care as well as resist and reject it.

Material symbolism in music and sport

'Good' residential practitioners are often thought of as those who work hard to get alongside a young person. A number of writers have suggested that this is facilitated by identifying and connecting with the likes and dislikes of the young person (cf. Krueger, 2010). Nowhere is this more prominent than in the worlds of sport and music. By following a musician, band or a sporting team young

people and staff members share a passion. This passion acts as a point of connection, not just about what is liked but was is felt. Having feelings in common, particularly about the same thing, is a powerful way of deepening a connection with another.

Over the years, I have seen young people and staff members swap information and knowledge as well as material items. These might be CDs, books, pictures, musical instruments or sporting equipment. This sharing demonstrates a sense of trust in the other as well as identifying to the supporters as well as to the outside world a sense of connection. Enjoying something together appears to also allow the enjoyment of each other. Sport or music (and many other activities and hobbies) allow the roles of young person and staff member to be transcended or at least suspended. These roles are replaced by those of 'fan' or 'supporter'. Like other forms of love, it is hard to fake. Young people appreciate the effort that adults go to know and understand their interests and to share their own passions with the children that they care for (Gilligan, 2008).

Objects from the 'outside'

Many of the objects and materials identified so far have been discussed in relation to their symbolic potential within the residential setting. However, all of these objects can also be used to represent a sense of being loved or loving those on the 'outside'. Many of the children placed in residential care will have experienced complex trauma within their family context (Steckley & Smith, 2011). However, often young people describe the sense of loyalty to family and a desire to remain connected both physically and emotionally (Luckock, Stevens, & Young, 2011).

Objects, can offer much to these dilemmas and complexities. They provide one way to communicate to others in the residential setting that the young person belongs elsewhere, that they were a person before care and that they are made up of much more than the care experience itself. Objects allow children a means to reject or downplay what Gilligan (2008, p.40) refers to as the 'all – embracing master identity of young person in care'. Children might also use these objects to actively remind themselves of this loyalty as a way of ensuring its continuation. Art work, poetry, photographs from family members have all been features of the walls and bedrooms of many of the young people with whom I have worked. The ways in which the material can offer these links to home (and indeed how they may be symbols of belonging to the institution itself) are gaining increasing recognition and research interest. For example, Wilson and Milne (2013) suggest that young people place significance on objects to identify and express a sense of belonging which is not always recognised by others around them.

Young people and staff may also use materials items as transitional objects. Winnicott (1971) suggested that these objects in infancy can take on the symbolic representation of the 'mother' and through these, the child carries the sense of love and caring with him/her. Thus, despite the mother's absence, the security and safety that she offers is contained within the object. Children and staff may use objects from 'home' to bring with them something of the outside. These objects may represent their younger self or indeed may act as a reminder that they are loved and cared for elsewhere. For some, the objects can take on the fantasy elements of family that they wish that they had. This has parallels with research undertaken on adults experiencing the death of a partner. Here the object not only reminds the person of their loved one but comes to stand for them metonymically (Lovatt, 2015).

Conclusion

Residential care is in many ways a unique setting where non-related adults and children are together in ways most commonly associated with family life. Children are placed there as a result of past pain and hurt and require that not only are their current emotional and physical needs met but also that they are afforded the opportunity to recover from traumatic relationships and instead experience attuned, responsive and nurturing care. In Scotland, the increasing numbers of children who are looked after on the grounds of emotional neglect brings into stark relief how essential it is for these children to experience being loved. Arguably, this is important not only for these children in the here and now but also for them as future givers and receivers of love and care. (Noddings, 2003).

In reality, relationships are complex, emotionally messy and hard to regulate. Without honest debate and discussion about the centrality of love and deep care in 'good' residential practice, love, like other relational aspects of social work practice will continue to be expressed and experienced 'in the cracks' (Trevithick, 2005). These loving acts will be undertaken despite the systems expectations of 'good care' practice rather than because of it. As a result, tenderness and love will remain a hidden and under recognised element of residential and foster care.

Reflecting on my own practice and reading the work of others I have been struck by the extent to which children and staff in residential are using symbolic means to reach out and make these deep connections. Children are offering the adults that care for them opportunities to make relationships and are doing so in ways that make sense to them (Winters, 2016). Tuning in to what is being said symbolically and thinking as practitioners about what we wish to communicate to the adults and children with whom we work can only help to allow love to be modelled, expressed, experienced and shared.

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