

REDWOOD GROVE: YOUTH CULTURE IN A GROUP HOME

JESSE GELWICKS

On a shady street in a California Central Valley college town stands a tan and brown two-story house. Out in front of the carport rises a low basketball hoop; beside it lies a square of scruffy grass. Scattered around the house are the signs of children: a basketball, a bicycle helmet, some candy wrappers and a well-worn skateboard. Two boys aggressively bounce a ball back and forth while two others stand nearby. The ball skids past the legs of one boy, causing a boy in line to shout, "He's smokin' your butt like cheese macaroni," which sends all but one of the boys into shrieks of laughter. The first boy in line replaces the boy who missed the ball and the game continues. Unlike similar driveway games going on around the neighborhood, this game is not played in front of a family home. These boys, whose names I have changed to protect their anonymity, live in a group home I will call Redwood Grove.

From fall of 1999 through the spring of 2000, I worked part-time at Redwood Grove. The following summer I increased my hours to full-time. As a staff member I cooked and served the boys meals, helped them with their homework, read to them, took them to the park, and played with them. I also enforced rules, gave "time-outs," and occasionally restrained them. My role as researcher was secondary to my role as a caretaker; therefore, I could not be a completely neutral observer. Most likely I could never escape the relationship of staff to ward. On the other hand, the boys knew I cared for them, and they grew to trust me. I was a part of the staff/ward hierarchy; however, my familiarity with the boys enabled me to see their everyday lives and behavior, as opposed to the behavior the boys presented to visitors.

This ethnography examines the seven boys who lived in the group home over the course of eleven months (during which time one boy left and another filled his slot). The number of participants in the study limits my ability to make major generalizations about children's lives in group homes. On the other hand, the small number of subjects allowed for informal and formal interviews and in-depth observations over the course of a year. My study builds on previous studies and research on children in institutions by psychologists and folklorists (see, for example: Polsky, Cohen and Eilersten, Horan, and Mechling).

In this paper, after a brief introduction to the group home and the rules and structure that govern it, I discuss the way behavior is charted and the way the staff imposes hierarchy. I then show that the boys in the group home constitute a folk group that creates a social hierarchy of its own in opposition to the one created and maintained by the staff. Then I

explore the various ways the boys construct frames and how their framed relationships create and maintain a social hierarchy. Following that section, I present two folk performances—storytelling and teasing—that the boys use for maintaining their hierarchy. Then I present two examples of the staff's influence on the folk culture.

In the second half of the paper I present a photography project in which I gave the boys the assignment of taking photographs of their important material possessions. I detail the process of taking the photographs and then situate the boys' photographs and perceptions of their material culture in the context of the group home culture and hierarchy.

This is a case study of male preadolescent and early adolescent folk culture. Perhaps because these boys live in a group home and must cope with an unusual, stressful living situation, they employ an intensified version of the ways children use folklore. Part of the lesson here is that boys sometimes try to use folklore and it fails. Those areas of failure are instructive. By looking at the successes and failures, adults have the opportunity to monitor the feelings and tensions the boys cannot express explicitly. Adults can learn about how boys see and react to the world around them and how that affects their male friendship group hierarchies.

REDWOOD GROVE

Redwood Grove is one of two houses run by a small nonprofit organization that operates group homes for children between the ages of eight and thirteen. The six boys at Redwood Grove were placed there by the California juvenile court because their parents used drugs or because the boys were abusive sexually, physically, or emotionally (the abuse often accompanies the drug use). Some of the boys were born with drugs in their systems. Four of them took daily behavior modifying medication. All were first put into foster care, which did not last because of behavior problems.

The facility was designed as a Level 11 group home. The level of the group home indicates the degree of supervision and structure provided for the children—the levels range from 8 to 15, with the highest being the most heavily structured and supervised. This group home aims to put structure into the boys' lives by regulating their behavior, providing constant supervision, making sure they have regular meals and snacks, and giving them group and individual counseling, all within a safe and supportive environment.

While psychologists such as William Pollack believe that many boys experience premature separation from their mothers, the boys at Redwood

Grove are the extreme cases; their emotional deficits are much greater than normal. The group home staff assists in repairing self-esteem and self-confidence. They attempt to curb the negative behaviors and self-hate, but because the group home is an institution with paid employees, not surrogate mothers, the boys must learn on their own as well. One way the boys deal with their past and present situations is through their folklore. From the games they play with each other and staff, to social hierarchies they create, to stories they tell about each other and staff, they are learning to cope with the psychological and social stresses in their lives.

Redwood Grove is similar to what Erving Goffman labels a "total institution," except that the boys are not completely shut off from the wider society. They go to public school, occasionally participate in city sports or recreation programs, and (depending on their behavior) go out in the town to buy toys, visit friends, or play in the park. Apart from school, all outside activities are opportunities that they must earn based on their behavior. Most of the time the boys are at Redwood Grove interacting with Redwood Grove staff and residents. Each day is tightly structured, "with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials" (Goffman 6). The activities, from the type of education to counseling to daily interactions, are designed to meet behavior modification goals set for the boys.

Weekdays during the school year are the most heavily structured days. From the moment the staff wakes them, the boys follow a tightly scheduled routine posted in the hallway, including school, daily chores, tutoring, meals and bedtimes. They earn free time in the afternoon if they finish their homework. If they have been behaving well, they can play outside. After dinner, they have free time until it is time to take a shower and go to bed. Bedtime is determined by their level on the behavior chart. Those who are behaving well that week stay up later and, consequently, earn more free time.

Before coming to Redwood Grove the boys had little structure or stability in their lives, while at the same time they had limited control over their lives. In some cases they took care of younger siblings. In the group home, they have both structure and stability, but almost no control. "Children are an underclass perpetually in the one-down power position" and "nowhere is this more true than in the residential institutions established for children" (Mechling 273). Staff create and enforce the rules that the wards live by. The boys act out and rebel against the rules and the staff react accordingly.

POINTS AND PRIVILEGES

A central element in molding the boys' behavior is a behavior chart on which the staff keep track of the boys' privileges and the amount of supervision they require. At any time upon entering Redwood Grove, staff can immediately determine each boy's behavior by consulting the chart in the dining room. The boys' initials are printed in erasable pen next to their step and level, which correspond to certain privileges; the three most important deal with supervision, video game time, and bedtime.

The chart was devised as a series of incentives to entice the boys to try to follow the rules. The boys can move up or down the chart each day depending on their behavior. The staff record how they behave on a point sheet. The boys' behavior is constantly scrutinized. Almost everything they do, from peer interaction, to following directions, to going to bed on time, has a corresponding point value. If they do their daily chores, they earn three points. If they make their beds, they earn one point. If they have good peer interactions during dinner, they earn four points. When they go to school, they turn in a behavior log to the teacher, who fills out points, grading them on their school work, homework, classroom behavior, and recess behavior. If they talk back to staff or will not follow directions, they cannot earn all their points.

The boys are often scattered across the behavior chart, although they more regularly tend to occupy the bottom half. Occasionally, one boy will be a level or two above the rest and enjoying privileges and freedom the others are not. At other times, the boys are grouped together closely. The disparity between the boys' levels and privileges creates a hierarchy in the group. This staff-monitored hierarchy competes with another hierarchy, created by the boys, which is based on power rather than good behavior. Just because a boy behaves well does not mean that he has much influence over the other boys; in fact, they often resent his superior position.

The boys' social hierarchy works counter to the staff-monitored hierarchy, minimizing the privilege of a high position on the behavior chart. The group can exclude a boy high on the behavior chart or induce him to misbehave in hopes that he will be caught and brought down with the rest of the group. While the boys' hierarchy does not directly break the rules, it is part of what Mechling describes as the "folk offensive in the political struggle over 'whose institution is this, anyway?'" (Mechling 276).

The social hierarchy created by the boys structures the group home culture and frames the social interaction between boys. The boys develop the frames in their everyday interactions, such as playing games, arguing, sharing, teasing, excluding and including others. Their tacit understanding of frames and the manipulation of frames cannot be underestimated. While

they may not be able to articulate the behavior, they understand the subtle nuances and body language that send the metameessages such as "this is play" and "this is a competition that looks like play."

POGO AND CREATING FRAMES

One afternoon Jerod, age twelve, and I were outside playing Pogo, the boys' version of the classic schoolyard game Two-Square. Although the structure of the game was traditional, the boys' names for certain hits and rule variations identified Pogo as their own folkgame. After two games, Jerod asked if I wanted to keep score. Keeping score was a common device the boys used to transform a simple Two-Square game into a more complicated and competitive game in which each time one person got the other "out" they won a point. They played either to a set number or until one finally gave up. The boys could only keep score when nobody stood in line; otherwise, the line rotated in with each "out."

During the first game, Jerod "played on" for my benefit when I made a mistake, and in return I "played on" for his, thus establishing the frame of a friendly game. I tried to continue that frame by "playing on" some of his questionable "scizzards," the boys' name for a fast and low hit that almost skids across the ground. He did the same for me. At the same time we were playing hard, "scizzarding" and "babying," a common name for the smallest hits, all over the court. Our play established that, although this was a friendly game frame, it was also competitive. I won a couple of games and got ahead of Jerod. As our scores reached the "teens" (near game's end), Jerod stayed just two behind me. I tried to tone down my playing a bit, but he would not let me lose enough for him to catch up. We both played hard, but we also made stupid mistakes to let the other win. We played "the twenties" harder, and finally, Jerod pulled ahead when I said I would play only three more games.

I realized Jerod planned out the whole game. Jerod had let me win before, but never as cleverly as this. I thought I was playing in a particular frame that we had both established, but really Jerod was creating that frame and manipulating it as we played. He was playing this game to keep me playing as long as I would. He manipulated me through the frame, just as a con artist might hustle a sucker; only instead of money, all Jerod wanted was one-on-one attention.

Boys often connect with others through actions such as initiating a game with a boy with whom they want to become friends (Pollack 182). Jerod sought connection with the other boys and staff through Pogo. For a period of eight to nine months the boys played Pogo more than any other

game in the house. Jerod often initiated those games, asking another boy or staff to come outside with him after he finished his homework. Pogo provided a medium for interaction.

Jake, age eleven, approached Pogo differently than Jerod. Jake was extremely competitive. Jerod, who loved to play Pogo, would often try to adapt to whomever he was playing—to play at the same level of competitiveness. One afternoon Jake and Jerod were playing Pogo and Jake took more advantage of the rules concerning lines, "do-overs" and interference than did Jerod. Jake was quick to point out when Jerod's hit was out of bounds, and Jerod was willing to go along with that. Jerod did not mention when a ball should have been called "interference" or "out back boundary" or "liner" or any of the other ways the boys identified when they should "redo" the point. Jake manipulated the frame so that he was winning. Jerod manipulated the frame so Jake continued to play; Jerod's desire for connection superseded his desire to win.

Play involves a negotiation of frames, and games can be personal or impersonal, depending on the frame the players establish. In some cases, the play frame extends beyond the single game and is reflective of the players' relationship. In the example above, the game was situated in the middle of a restructuring of the boys' social hierarchy. Jake was vying for the opening position at the top the hierarchy as Joshua, age thirteen, was leaving. Jerod, who was older than Jake, did not make any strong attempts at that position. Similar to the way he played Pogo, Jerod took a less competitive approach to the social hierarchy. Through Pogo, Jerod developed methods of interaction he could use outside of the folkgame.

SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE: JOSHUA AND THOMAS

The boys maintained and challenged their socially constructed hierarchy every day in the way they interacted with each other. In turn, the hierarchy framed their interactions. As they stayed within the frames created by the hierarchy or reinforced those frames, the hierarchy's structure strengthened. In the following examples, the boys construct and maintain those frames through a series of interactions.

One Friday, all the boys, except for Thomas, age eleven, who was staying at the house due to his poor behavior, were in the van about to go to their weekly counseling group for victims. Before the van could pull out of the driveway, Thomas ran out to the van to try to join the group. Thomas and Joshua started exchanging words. Joshua, who was sitting in the front seat, lunged through the window with his fists clenched and screamed at Thomas that he was going to "kick his ass." Joshua knew that

he could not attack Thomas (the car door was in the way), but he could make a dramatic display by lunging out of the open window at Thomas yelling and waving his fists.

Joshua displayed his power and potential for violence in front of the other boys without risking much. He would lose peer interaction points and perhaps drop a level for threatening behavior, but he did not actually make contact with Thomas. Joshua was playing the role of the "tough guy" without actually having to prove it, a behavior characteristic of what Pollack describes as the "mask" of masculinity. Joshua's stylized performance of aggression may actually be "an invisible shield, a persona to show the outside world a feigned self confidence and bravado, and to hide the shame he felt at his feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness and isolation." (Pollack 5).

Joshua's display left the other boys to decide whether it was a bluff or he actually was that mean and vicious. Joshua framed the boys' relationship with him in terms of his own projected violence, thereby taking the dominant role in their future interactions. This frame would help Joshua maintain his position at the top of the social hierarchy, rewarding him for his masculine image.

THOMAS AND FRANCISCO

The week following Joshua's display of aggression, another incident of symbolic violence took place. On the way to group, Thomas, who was having yet another horrible day, provoked Francisco, age 10, into exchanging rapid insults. Before the van had left the home block, the name-calling had escalated to the point where Thomas was lunging at Francisco, who was sitting in the seat in front of him. I was sitting next to Thomas, so I easily held him back, just as the car door had held back Joshua.

The previous week's events made an impression on Thomas. He tried to recreate the dangerous and powerful image that Joshua had created without actual physical violence, just as Joshua had done. Thomas followed the same pattern by choosing a target lower on the social hierarchy than he and by choosing a time when he would be held back from actually making contact.

The stylized symbolic violence by Joshua and Thomas sent a message to the other boys about potential actual violence, as well as a message about the structure of the social hierarchy. Joshua demonstrated symbolic violence as an effective means of displaying power. When Thomas copied Joshua's behavior he did not move up the social hierarchy as much as reinforce people's existing positions within the social hierarchy. He solidi-

fied his position over Francisco as well as reinforcing Joshua's behavior and position.

MAINTAINING THE HIERARCHY: THOMAS AND THE OLD CEREAL

One of the various ways of maintaining position in the social hierarchy at Redwood Grove was teasing. The teasing was structured around the boys' fears, which were translated into negative attributes that induced shame, the fundamental control mechanism boys use to create and maintain their group culture (Pollack 33). Insults about being gay, feminine, weak, contaminated, dirty, different, or without friends, were rooted in the boys' fears about sexuality, masculinity, safety, inclusion, protection, love, and the shame of being identified as having any negative or unmasculine characteristics.

A reoccurring theme in their teasing was centered on the boys' fear of dirt and of being contaminated by their food. This particular fear of contamination manifested itself in two ways at the group home. First, the boys were uncertain of the purity of their food. They rarely saw it prepared, and they were not given a choice about what they would like to eat. They were also uncertain about what it would do to them. They had only a vague understanding of the cause and effect of eating spoiled food. Second, the boys used that uncertainty to control. They exercised control by not eating foods they felt were spoiled.

The control exercised by one boy upon another, exemplified in their teasing, is a form of social exclusion. The next few examples trace a particular tease from its possible conception and show how that tease was modified over time and became absorbed into the boys' folklore.

One morning, when Thomas was on the highest level and also the last to the breakfast table, he poured himself some cereal that was past its expiration date, which he did not notice. The other boys had already seen the date and avoided the cereal. They waited until Thomas had taken a bite and then chimed in together about how he had eaten old rotten cereal. They went on and on. "Moldy cereal! How could you eat that?" Thomas left the table crying and would not eat breakfast.

For the rest of the day, the boys continued to tease Thomas, their teasing ranging from overt to more cryptic forms in which the boys would merely mention a single word that referred to the morning's events. They inserted the words "cereal," "mold," and "rotten" at the end of sentences, or they just casually said the word alone. The boys manipulated and advanced the tease so that it was only apparent to those in the group. A staff

person arriving for the afternoon shift might not pick up anything until Thomas reacted to the teasing. Only through close observation of the boys' behavior could a staff member recognize the teasing.

The tease ostracized Thomas from the group and in doing so united the group against him. While the group as a whole, all six boys, may not have grown stronger, the group of five did. Despite any previous conflicts, they connected by ostracizing one. They could all agree that he was not worthy of being part of the group because the old cereal contaminated him. They were also united by level. Thomas was higher on the behavior chart than everyone else. He was at the top of the adult-regulated hierarchy. The group reminded him that he was not better than the rest. While he might be at the top the hierarchy on the behavior chart, he was, at least for that situation, at the bottom of the folk social hierarchy.

As teases, such as the Thomas cereal tease, lasted beyond the incident and beyond the day of the incident, they entered the group folklore. Like a story that everyone in the group knew, the cereal tease became a tease that everyone knew, remembered, and reacted to. As long as they used some version of the tease, it stayed alive. Because everyone knew it and because it had already been encoded on the first day, it was easy to maintain. When the boys teased Thomas about the old cereal, they did not need to recite the whole tale, just enough for Thomas to know what they were teasing him about.

THOMAS AND THE NAPKIN

A perfect example of how this encoded tease was carried on happened when the boys were eating dinner a few weeks after the initial event. Joshua and Bobby, age 10, were both on the lowest level of privileges and seated on the perimeter of the room, while Francisco, Jerod and Thomas were eating at the table. Thomas asked for the salt. Joshua and Bobby chimed in asking for some too. A staff member gave the salt to Thomas and asked him to pass it on to them when he was finished. He walked over and handed it to Bobby. Instead of just taking it from Thomas, Bobby held a napkin so as not to touch the saltshaker. Jerod and Joshua erupted into laughter, and Thomas ran crying out of the room. The effects of the napkin tease were the same as the initial event: Thomas left the room crying. But the actual teasing was limited to a simple action rather than a barrage of remarks. The tease was just as powerful even though it was simplified.

Thomas later explained what happened. The teasing had begun earlier in the week when Joshua started acting as if Thomas were contaminated, and he would not touch objects Thomas had touched. Bobby only partici-

pated in the teasing for the first time at that meal. At some point the boys had made a big deal about Thomas and his contamination, so much so that they only had to act out part of it—the napkin grab and the laughter—to send Thomas into tears.

The napkin incident was not completely a direct result of the cereal incident. Once the cereal incident became encoded and became part of their folklore and folk culture, the boys mixed that event with other similar events. The events previous to the cereal incident laid the foundation for the cereal tease to be as powerful as it was. The cereal may not have been the beginning of the tease, but the spoiled cereal theme became part of an ongoing and developing folklore about contamination and Thomas.

JOSHUA AND STORYTELLING

Around the same time, a story emerged that Joshua told. It may have been told before or may have been created on the spot for the particular situation. Its validity is uncertain. Joshua recalled how Thomas had been forced to dig in the trash by an older boy when Thomas had first moved in. Joshua described Thomas's action with disgust and contempt. As he told it, the other boys began to remember the incident and some tried to add details, but Joshua kept control of the story, repeating or dismissing what they added. Even Bobby, who had not been there, thought he remembered the event.

Joshua told the story to illustrate Thomas's contamination. The story was characteristic of other folklore that had grown out of past events at Redwood Grove. Joshua told the most stories or, rather, the most successful stories. He was the oldest and had been at Redwood Grove the longest. He was also at the top of the group hierarchy. His perspective could not be disputed. Often the stories were exclusive. They were a roll call of who was there, unifying and empowering those included, a reward for their time spent at Redwood Grove. Thus, when Bobby remembered the event, he was ridiculed because he was not there and therefore not part of the group that could remind Thomas, though he could still laugh at Thomas's behavior.

The stories would often go back to a time when a few of the boys were not there yet, such as the time one of the old residents threw a bike on the roof or when all the residents were on the highest level on the behavior chart at one point the previous summer. The bike incident would be recalled to make comparisons to current behavior, to show that although Francisco punched and hit staff, his behavior was not nearly as bad as the behavior of previous boys. The "high-point-in-behavior" story would

be recalled when they were dealing with difficult times on the behavior chart during school. And, of course, there were stories used to tease. The stories served Joshua well, reminding the other boys that he was on top in size, age, and time served, and that those could not be challenged.

When Joshua left, storytelling, for the most part, died. Jake tried to revive it to help maintain his position at the top of the group hierarchy. While Jake was the strongest, he was not the oldest, and he had only come a month before Thomas, so his exclusive stories were limited. He never developed his storytelling skills, so he resorted to other methods.

CREATING NEW WAYS TO TEASE

While the boys were dealing with each other and their social organization, they also had to deal with the staff, who were constantly observing and intervening. The boys' teasing and storytelling had to work around the staff. Teasing in general was not condoned and usually punished, but impossible to stop. When the staff picked up on teasing, the teasers were given appropriate punishments, often separation for a short period of time. Staff would also try to squelch continual teases such as the cereal tease and negative storytelling, both of which were virtually outlawed by increasing the penalties for whoever repeated them.

Limited by his lack of storytelling ability and outlawed forms of teasing, Jake created a new form of teasing. One day at the table during afternoon snack, Jake began quizzing the other boys in spelling or mathematics. He aggressively questioned Thomas, and brought Thomas down, as he stumbled over the answers. The other boys were questioned as well. As they struggled to come up with answers, Jake positioned himself at the top of the hierarchy.

At the time, Jerod and Francisco were both at the bottom of the behavior chart and were not allowed to interact with the group, which was fortunate for Jake, since they were two of the smarter boys and Jerod was a grade ahead of Jake. The second time Jake tried quizzing the boys, Jerod was able to participate and Jake's questioning was less effective because Jerod knew the answers.

The new approach stood out in contrast to other forms of teasing because it positioned one boy more or less opposed to the rest of the boys. A less powerful boy could have the group turn on him, ostracizing him from them. As it was, Jake manipulated the situation to put others down and build himself up by comparison. Although he was neither the oldest nor (probably) the smartest, he was able to make himself seem the smartest by not allowing himself to be questioned. As long as he controlled the questions, he always had the right answer.

UNEQUAL POWER RELATIONSHIPS: "STEVE" FOLKLORE

The fears the boys dealt with ranged from abstract—such as abandonment—to the immediate fears about particular people and places. The way the boys dealt with unequal power relationships was similar to the way they dealt with fear; they incorporated it into their folk culture. The following example illustrates how the boys of Redwood Grove integrated a power conflict with a staff member into their joking and teasing.

One staff member, Steve, had a very confrontational manner. He constantly displayed his power over the boys by the way he told them to do their chores and pick up their things, bossing them around rather than asking. He made extra rules, like not letting boys on the lowest behavior levels change the television channel. Steve induced fear in the boys, not by hurting them, but by wielding his authority punitively. If they came in conflict with him, they received harsh consequences, often the extreme consequence for the behavior.

Steve got results, but at the expense of shoving the boys' powerlessness in their faces. The boys dealt with Steve by incorporating him into their vernacular folklore. The boys talked about Steve when he was not around. His name was used most commonly as an insult, aimed at each other as well as a staff member. For instance, one boy would tell the other that he was "as fat as Steve" when they commented on how much they were eating, which was a comical insult most often heard around the table at meals. An awkward movement, like hitting a ball poorly, was mocked by saying the person hit the ball so badly, he hit it "like Steve." The boys diminished Steve's power by making him the object of their jokes and insults. Steve was a negative figure that the boys could agree on. When he was on his shift, they might obey his orders, but when he was not around, he was mocked. While the boys complained when other strict staff came on shift, the other staff were not ridiculed the way Steve was.

Ridiculing Steve, the boys felt powerful. Like all children in institutions, the boys at Redwood Grove were able to find power in seemingly powerless situations. They found satisfaction in distorting the adult authority. Where there was little power available to them, they invented new forms, such as when Jake asked a few of the boys seemingly legitimate questions in math and spelling, knowing they wouldn't be able to answer them. He might have been attempting to recreate the power relationship he felt between the teacher and student.

Storytelling and teasing are time-honored ways children establish a social hierarchy outside adult control. The power of them is heightened in a group home setting where the boys spend almost all their time together and have so few other possibilities for participating in alternative social hierarchies.

Behind the boys' hurtful teasing, I believe, is their anxiety about the behavior-chart hierarchy. The behavior chart draws attention to the boys' positions in relation to one another, creating a competitive atmosphere that promotes social ranking. They react to the behavior-chart hierarchy established by the adults, and in an attempt to undermine it, they create a new social organization in its image. Rather than the boy at the top being rewarded by his peers for his good behavior, the rest of the group punishes him. He is also encouraged to play the role of the victim, for if he stands up for himself, responding with anger or aggression towards the teasing, he risks dropping on the behavior chart.

Adults can intervene and impose control based on behavior charts and points, but the social hierarchy framed by the boys is also a very powerful force in shaping the children's experiences.

MATERIAL CULTURE IN A GROUP HOME

Along with the social frames that regulate the boys' experience is the material setting that is the background for their interactions. From the house they live in to the coveted Gameboy games in their toy chests, their material environment effects their social culture and hierarchies. When I first entered the group home, I began to make a list of what seemed to be the important items in the boys' lives: the *round* red rubber ball, video games, bicycles with shocks, Pokémon paraphernalia, batteries, and other items that could be borrowed or traded. The most easily identifiable items of importance were those in highest demand. The importance of personal items of comfort and pleasure, such as teddy bears and worn action figures, were harder to judge since they were largely ignored by all the boys except the owner.

As I became aware of their material culture at Redwood Grove, I sought to answer the question posed by Jon Wagner in a recent edition of the journal *Visual Sociology*, namely, "What aspects of their own material and social circumstances do kids notice and why?" For a researcher to answer that question, he or she must feel confident in having a child's perspective. To feel confident I had the perspective of the boys in the group home, I relied on three methods of obtaining information: observation, interviews, and photography. The boys' photography allowed me to see through their eyes, and the interviews gave the boys an opportunity to explain what they saw.

The object of my project was to have the boys record the toys, memorabilia, gifts, and mementos that were important using their own camera. Rather than observe what toys were played with the most, what objects

were the most treasured and valued, I placed the decisions into the hands of the children.

I built upon the questions raised and approaches taken by photographers Jim Hubbard, Lauren Greenfield (see Levin), Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Wendy Ewald, and the young photographers they worked with. These professional photographers sought to empower youth by giving them control of the camera to capture their world on film and speak to people through their photographs. Osofu Washington, a young photographer who worked with Greenfield on *Picture LA*, said "if people can understand our landmarks, they can see things from our point of view" (Levin 4). The premise of my photography project was based on Washington's words. By following the steps of seeing the photograph and understanding the photograph, then hopefully it is possible to see things from the child's perspective.

The boys at Redwood Grove faced specific restrictions, which set the parameters of the photography project. They faced behavior-level restrictions, such as limitations on where they could go, what items were available to them, and when they could take the photographs. Items left with their parents were unobtainable, as well as items confiscated by staff. The boys on the lowest behavior level had most of their toys confiscated. Some of the boys could not leave the house or the yard. They were also limited to thirty-six photographs.

The boys may have also decided not to take some pictures because they would be sharing these photographs with other people. They may have selected their photographs to suit what they thought their audience might want to see. They may have been ashamed to identify belongings that they felt were not masculine enough, even though those items were important to them, similar to the way the boys in Pollack's study felt ashamed of expressing emotions and feelings they felt were feminine.

I explained the project to the boys in short information sessions right before giving them the disposable cameras. 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 that they felt were important to them. They were given no extra supervision when they used the cameras and possibly even a little more freedom by the staff. When they completed their roll of film, they returned the cameras to me, and I took the film in to be developed. Before I brought the photographs back to the boys, I went through them and made a list of the photographs. Once I had gone over their pictures a couple of times and made myself familiar with them, I went back to Redwood Grove and interviewed the boys as we looked over their pictures. The interviews were taped and then transcribed. After the interviews, the boys were given their photographs in a flipbook to keep. I

followed up on the project by checking to see how they manipulated their booklets.

TAKING THE PHOTOGRAPHS

On the day the boys received the cameras, they came into the office in twos. Jake and Bobby came first. They listened to the directions and expectations, and then I asked a couple of different times and in a couple of different ways if they understood. I could see their ears turned off as their minds started racing with ideas of what they would photograph. When they saw the cameras, they became restless and fidgety, their eyes darting about excitedly; their complete attention was on the yellow cardboard camera in my hand. They immediately wanted to touch the cameras, fool with them, and begin taking pictures. Their reaction was similar to the reaction Hubbard (*Shooting Back*) received when he worked with children at a shelter. They also wanted to know if they would get to keep the cameras and were disappointed when they heard the cameras were disposable. As I explained how to use the flash, they were bouncing in their seats, anxious to leave the office and take pictures. Finally, I opened the door and they ran out clicking and winding through the hallway.

Nicholas, age 8, and Thomas came in next. Nicholas, who had already seen Jake and Bobby run out with cameras, was anxious to get his. Thomas came into the office immediately exclaiming that he had not done anything wrong. Obviously, sitting in the office with a staff member created a certain frame for the situation, possibly augmenting the boys' anxiousness to leave and take pictures. Nicholas and Thomas were just as excited as Bobby and Jake. The boys did not want to listen to any directions. The power they would have with the camera seemed intoxicating.

Unfortunately, Jerod and Francisco were not on high enough levels to receive cameras; both were at the bottom of the behavior chart. It took Jerod two days to move up to a high enough level to receive a camera. Unlike the other boys, Jerod was much calmer and did not bounce around, and he asked questions. Jerod's approach may be reflective of his age and maturity or the diminished excitement of the group now that most had completed their roll of film.

It took Francisco two weeks before he raised himself from the bottom level and could participate in the project. Unlike Jerod, Francisco wore his excitement on his face; his eyes and his grin widened when he saw the camera.

The first four boys finished within the day, three within the first one to two hours, one within the first half-hour. When Francisco finally received

his camera, he finished it within the day, probably within a couple of hours judging from the photographs he took. When I picked up Jerod's roll, five days after I initially gave it to him, he still had a couple of pictures left, which he promptly took.

The younger boys finished their rolls of film more quickly than the older boys. Nicholas, the youngest, finished his first. Jerod, the oldest, finished last. What led the boys to take their photographs so quickly? Jake's roll in particular captured a stream of consciousness perspective, as if the viewer of his photographs was looking through his eyes for five minutes. The boys' excitement and desire surrounding the taking of photographs took on an almost libidinal quality—the instant gratification of taking a photograph, each one exciting and satisfying in its own right. Rather than seeming in competition with one another, the boys seemed to feed off each other's energy. After taking a photograph of the toys on his dresser, Nicholas raced outside to the bike rack, on the way snapping a photograph of Francisco posing holding a Pokemon.

The desire to snap off as many pictures as possible may also be linked to the uncertainty the boys felt about how long they would have the cameras. If they dropped to the bottom of the behavior chart, the cameras, along with their other toys, could be taken away. If they shot quickly, there would be nothing left for staff to confiscate.

Unlike the other boys, Jerod may have savored the experience, or he simply was not caught up in the excitement and forgot about the last few pictures.

During the interviews, which I did individually, a couple of the boys behaved differently than usual. Two of them used sweet baby voices and attitudes while answering the questions. They all demonstrated their best behavior, although Bobby became a little silly during parts of his interview. Their behavior may reflect their enjoyment of one-on-one attention from a staff member as well as feeling safe from ridicule from others when they were explaining their photographs. In addition, they knew an unknown outside audience would see and hear the results of the project, and they wanted to display their best behavior.

ANALYZING AND INTERVIEWING

Not surprisingly, none of the boys followed the directions completely. Rather than a collection of photographs of toys and other items the boys treasured, their photographs ranged from a dead rat to another boy's "special friends" (adults from the community who act as personal mentors), from pictures of other boys to pictures of their toys, from the staff at

Redwood Grove to Redwood Grove itself. Surprisingly, the photographs that proved the most descriptive about the boys' material culture, their social culture, and their experience at Redwood Grove were the photographs that fell outside the originally stated guidelines.

Nicholas took twelve pictures of other people's stuff, their toys, their rooms, and their posters. While some of the pictures included those boys who owned the stuff, making it unclear as to the focus of the picture, the pictures were still of items that did not belong to Nicholas. It is possible that Nicholas was merely taking photographs of his environment—the other boys and their stuff are major parts of that environment—but the interview revealed possibly another motivation.

When asked why Jake's Red Version Pokémon Gameboy game was important to him, Nicholas answered, "Because it is very important to me and I'll probably get it. . . for my birthday," which was untrue. Nicholas's statement translates to "I want it." Besides the Red Pokémon game's being a highly valued item in the house, Jake first took Nicholas under his wing when Nicholas moved in, letting him play his Pokémon games and Gameboys whenever Nicholas wanted. For Nicholas, 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.

Nicholas similarly describes a photograph of Thomas's radio. "I took a picture of that because I want that." He nodded when asked if he wanted Francisco and Nathaniel's bikes. This theme continued as he talked about and explained the rest of his photographs. Real insight came when he was explaining a photograph he took of some of Bobby's toys on Bobby's dresser. While listing the items in the photograph, he ended the list by saying "I want deodorant" and when asked, "You don't get deodorant?" he responded by blurting "Yes, I will!" While obviously Nicholas misunderstood the question, his outburst reveals his desire for deodorant goes beyond material desire. The deodorant represents more than just another boy's object. Nicholas is the youngest in the house. He is smallest, the last to arrive, and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The deodorant represents growing up and becoming bigger like Jake and Jerod, who are entering puberty. Deodorant represents one of the signs that he is bigger, older, and more powerful. Boys towards the top of the hierarchy wear deodorant.

The boys took over forty percent of their photographs of people. Those pictures fall into three categories: those of themselves, those of other boys in the house, and those of adults such as staff and special friends. The two boys who took the most pictures of other boys in the house were Nicholas and Thomas. Eighteen out of twenty-four of Thomas's photographs were

photographs of people, and eleven of those eighteen included other boys. Nine of Nicholas's photographs were of people, and six of those were of the other boys. The rest of the boys only took one picture with other boys in it. Jake represents the other end of the spectrum; he took only one photograph of other boys out of eleven that were of people.

The two boys lowest on the hierarchy took the most pictures of the boys, and the highest on the hierarchy took the least. Jake may not have felt like he had to "suck up" or even show that he liked the other boys because he was at the top. He may not have even thought to take pictures of them, although that is unlikely since they all were clamoring to be photographed. It did not matter if they liked him. He was the strongest and the toughest. Nicholas and Thomas, on the other hand, were not particularly tough or strong, and both were struggling to move up the social hierarchy. Nicholas and Thomas may have been trying to build connections with Jake and the other boys by demonstrating their friendship. They may also have admired the other boys and wanted the power they had.

Thomas devoted two of his photographs to Jake and Jake's special friends, and then just Jake's special friends alone. While Jake may be important to Thomas, Jake's special friends are not. They do not spend much time around Redwood Grove playing with the other boys; instead, they take Jake out somewhere, to their house or the movies. Unless Thomas enjoyed Jake's absence, the special friends had no relationship to Thomas. In the interview, Thomas could not articulate why he took the photograph beyond saying "Jake's special friends are important because they're someone. . . [and] every living thing is important." Thomas did not even have a reason why they are special to him.

Why would Thomas take the photographs? Thomas has his own special friends. In fact, he has the most special friends of any of the boys in the house. Jake and his special friends may be Thomas's picture of the relationship between a boy and his special friends, a type of relationship that Thomas valued. Jake's special friends represent Thomas's special friends. He could have waited until later that week to take a picture of his special friends, but decided not to wait. On the other hand, Thomas's photographs may be similar to Nicholas's photograph of Jake's Gameboy game; Thomas may have been trying to please Jake.

None of the boys took photographs of traditional folk toys or toys of their own creation besides Bobby's photograph of his rock collection and Francisco's photograph of a feather. Either they did not value the folk toys they played with, or they thought the toys were inappropriate. As Simon Bronner notes in his article recalling his own favorite folk toy, the Gropper, "For several years, Gropper held an honored place among my other toys-cars, Teddy Bears, blocks, and soldiers-but at some point I

became self-conscious and a bit embarrassed about my fantasy and discarded Gropper, bag and baggage" (251). The boys may simply have been ashamed of their folk toys, too ashamed to show anyone. Bronner explains, "Yet often such creativity eludes the watchful eye of the parent, no less the curator or ethnographer. The child commonly keeps the creation private" (251). The boys may also have been taking photographs of items that they thought the ethnographer would want to see.

The boys play with their own creations, often alterations of mass-produced toys, such as action figures without an arm or a head. Bronner explains the importance of that type of folk toy—"Such experiences emphasized their control, their personalizing of things around them" (264). The boys also reused broken toys as if they were brand new-transformational toys, as Bronner would call them. They are also observed playing with creations of the imagination, such as in the sandbox or turning a stump into an action figure's hideout. These acts of autonomy may not be shared easily.

Children's folk culture may be too private. The boys have very little autonomy in the group home setting and may seek to create separate environments in their own imagination, environments that may be shared with another boy or kept completely to themselves. Although the group home at times seems to be overflowing with people, there are times when the boys are expected to play by themselves, especially if they are acting out and their toys have been confiscated and their socializing limited.

If any boys were ashamed of the things that were important to them, they might not have taken a photograph of it to avoid ridicule. Pollack identifies a rigid "boy code" that leads boys of all ages to hold back emotions and behaviors for fear of acting feminine (21). While the boys own stuffed animals and other toys that could reveal tenderness, thoughtfulness and creativity, they might not feel comfortable sharing that side because they feel that those items and emotions make them appear weak. They are afraid of others' ridicule. Thomas had a pile of Teddy Bears on his bed most of the time, but they were only included in a larger picture of his room. Those Teddy Bears might not have been masculine enough to be the focus of a picture. They might be very important to him, but he could not reveal that importance to the other boys.

One photographic subject most of the boys were not afraid to take a picture of was themselves. Everyone except Jerod took a picture or had a picture taken of him. Jake, Bobby, Thomas, and Francisco had multiple pictures of themselves. Hubbard provides insight into children's photographs of themselves. "On more than one occasion we have found that these kids carry the photographs of themselves every day to show others. Though they didn't take the pictures, the photographs are important none

theless. They proclaim: 'Here I am, I am real, I am of value' to the rest of the world"(*Shooting Back from the Reservation* xiii). Although the children Hubbard writes of are Native American, it is not a stretch to apply their feelings to the group-home boys. In many ways the two groups are very similar.

All the boys at Redwood Grove come from environments and life circumstances that destroy children's self esteem. When they enter the group home, staff try to continually remind them of their worth, to build them up from their negative self-images. The boys have pictures of their families or members of their families to remind them. Those photographs are treasured because in some cases those are the only connections they have. People in photographs are important, and the pictures the boys took of themselves are their way of reaffirming their importance.

One continual theme throughout the interviews with the boys was how, practical the object was. For example, Jerod described his photographs of the house, "the house, so we have a place to live in," and the washing machine, "the washing machine is important 'cause otherwise we couldn't wash our clothes and they would be stinky." Francisco also focused on the practicality of things, such as the bus; "I took a picture of the bus because it is kind of important. So if we didn't have a car we could go on the bus" and one of the staff's cars, "I took a picture of Andre's car cause, well, so we can move around quickly and so we don't have to walk or ride the bus and without the bus we would have to walk." This method of describing objects reflects the lack of importance of the object outside of its practical role.

The practical descriptions continued when the boys talked about their Pokémon toys and cards. Jerod, as well as the other boys, were very involved with the collecting of Pokémon cards. Jerod took five pictures of his cards, but none of them was of a specific card. When asked why he liked them he answered, "Cause I like to trade' em." He identified their importance as social. They provided entertainment in trading and prestige in having particular cards, but the particular card did not matter. His attitude was similar to Francisco's description of a photograph of Jerod's Pokémon toys. Francisco's description parallels Jerod's perspective on Pokémon; "These two are Charzards and Blastoids in Jerod's room 'cause I really like Pokémon." When I asked "Are those toys important to you?" he answered, "The Pokémon, not the toys. I don't really care about them." To Francisco the symbol of Pokémon was important. Pokémon affected the power relations within the house as well as at school, as having cards and games provided prestige to the owner.

AFTER THE INTERVIEWS

The photography project was not finished when I gave the boys their flipbooks with their pictures inside. Bobby, who had the least amount of pictures turn out, filled his book with other photographs that he had. At first he was a little bashful when I asked him to show his book, possibly since he thought I might be offended that he had removed all of the pictures I had developed for him. He explained who everyone in the pictures was and included a short anecdote with a couple of them. All the photographs Bobby added were of his family. A week later Bobby had removed almost all of the photographs he had taken and replaced them with all the photographs he already owned. Though he did not need the space, he may have been ashamed of his photography skills since he was unhappy with the way his photographs turned out, many of them dark and blurry. Of course it also could have been that the photographs he just took were not as important as those of his family.

Nicholas also added to his flipbook, placing his Polaroid of himself on Santa's knee at the back of his book. When Jake, the last boy interviewed, finished with the interview, he asked in as sweet a voice as I had ever heard him use if he could add pictures to his album. The photographs of the important material culture and the books I gave them were becoming material culture.

The boys did not demonstrate an overwhelming desire for material possessions. The important material items in their lives were physical links between themselves and others, symbolic of the connection they shared. Material items were also described in practical terms—cupboards holding the snacks or Pokémon to be traded.

The boys' lack of consuming commodity goods reflects their relationship to material culture. Outside the occasional pack of Pokémon cards, the boys bought very little. They did not have much disposable income, and they had very few opportunities to spend the little they had. Also, the uncertainty that surrounded their lives included uncertainty about how long they would possess a toy. The toys they had when they lived at home were gone. The toys they had at the group home were regularly confiscated, creating an uncertainty that may have decreased the desire for material possessions.

CONCLUSION

This is a case study of the folk culture of preadolescent and early adolescent boys living in a total institution. Although these boys live in an

unusual setting, they use the same-but more intensified versions of strategies boys employ in resolving their social and psychological tensions. Their folklore develops around common childhood experiences, such as when they created the game Pogo, and also around their need to deal with specific group home situations, such as when they used Steve's name as an insult in response to his inappropriate use of power.

The folklore sometimes creates the solution, as when the boys use a game frame to establish contact with a staff person or another boy, and the folklore is sometimes the problem, as in teasing. A game frame enables Jerod to establish meaningful relationships when his primary relationships have been damaged or destroyed, and the experience of connecting and creating those connections is empowering.

Teasing as folklore goes beyond playfulness and allows the boys to subvert the intent of the behavior-chart hierarchy established by the staff. The amount of energy and creativity that goes into teasing reveals the importance of this form of expression to the boys.

The boys' photographs of their material culture reveal a continual focus on each other and each other's possessions. Certainly, the other boys and their toys are a significant part of the material setting of the group home for each boy, but the items the boys value are also symbolic. They can be symbols of friendship or connection to a more powerful boy. In other instances, the important material items themselves symbolize age and power, as with the deodorant.

Studies of children's folklore such as this one can be instructive to adults working in children's institutions, revealing unintended consequences and the success (or failure) of strategies for modifying and shaping behavior. Attempting to see the world through children's eyes enables adults to examine the role of friendship groups, teasing, and playing beyond whether the behavior is obedient or disruptive. Having an awareness of the anxieties children experience, such as in response to the adult imposed behavior chart hierarchy, may lead adults to reevaluate and redesign the structure of children's institutions.

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