Unpacking the Stash: A Preliminary Note on Creative Concealment Among Children and Adolescents

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One of the features of good children is their display of evidence that they have learned their lessons well, that they have internalized parental standards and expectations as their own. An important aspect of this task involves *the concealment of evidence that they have not*: Indeed, in the presentation and preservation of a self, what is hidden is as crucial as what is revealed.

Although Goffman (1959) has chronicled in rich detail the *interactional* strategies that children and others might employ to accomplish the concealment of discrepant information, there is another element of the art that remains relatively unstudied. I am referring here to the actual physical hiding or *stashing* of things that suggests deviance from the parentally-approved self.

The child who hides something, though, reveals much more than he conceals. This is clearly the case when we examine the object that is stashed; in it we confront highly-localized versions of the prohibited, the disapproved, the scarce, the inappropriate. In what is hidden we witness an array of household normative orders so vast in its particularity as to defy the categorical vision of the world offered by social observers of the scientific bent. The contents of the stash afford us a peek "backstage," a valued look at the household *sans* "presentation of self." Thus far the character of what gets hidden has been neglected as a resource for studying the operation of family life.

But there is more. Besides revealing something of the normative order local to his space, the child who hides an object tells us something of his relationship to that order: He has grasped both it and the consequentiality of violating it. This can be gleaned from the fact that hiding has taken place. Thus far students of socialization have neglected to assess the child's recognition that there are things-to-be-hidden for its potential benchmark status.

There is still more. While an examination of *what* is hidden makes visible some aspects of a space's normative order and

documents the child's attunement to them, even the most cursory look at *where* things are hidden stands to reveal matters much more crucial to an understanding of the child's world and his or her development within it. Indeed, where an item is stashed indexes the child's cognitive progress, for in answering the question "Where might a thing be hidden?" he or she displays both the dimensions of his or her current repertoire of ethnographic and methodological knowledge and his or her ability to work around the conditions set by others.

What are the features of this knowledge? In an attempt to answer this question I solicited anonymous personal accounts of stash-related behavior from students enrolled in a sociology class at the University of British Columbia. Participants were asked to indicate what they stashed, why the stashed it, where their stash was located, and why they chose such a locale. The responses to the latter two questions provide the database for this paper.[1]

Probably to the disappointment of some, the contents of the stash are ignored in favor of pursuing this interest in its location. While the former may tell us *that* and *how* children and adolescents have strayed from parental teaching, the latter reveals that they have learned a set of more fundamental lessons. Where might a thing-to-be-hidden be hidden? This question follows immediately the recognition that such things exist. At an early stage in the cognitive career, children answer it in a way that suggests that *phenomenal invisibility* is the paramount criterion used in assessing the adequacy of a stash locale: A good-enough place is a place where the thing cannot be seen. The thing-beneath-the-bed documents the operation of this selection procedure, as does the thing-under-the-pillow.

Later, under pillows and beds are seen as "places where kids hid things." It is understood that whatever is stashed is not merely concealed: It is concealed in ways that consult the local risk of a locale's discovery, concealed in tune with the understanding that the array of available places to hide things is not homogenous with respect to this risk. Later, the question "Where might a thing be hidden?" is regarded as properly answered with another: "How might a thing be found?"

How might a thing be found? In answering this crucial question the child displays his grasp of his space as an arena of activity and, as we will see, one populated by actors with distinctive motivations and sensibilities; mother, father, and siblings are not merely statuses in a genealogy but highly particularized

courses of action that have to be taken into account in the selection of a stash locale.

From the chosen place we learn that a stash may be found as the outcome of motivated looking for the stash itself, as the result of the motivated looking for something else, or as the by-product of the enactment of a household routine.

Motivated looking for the stash itself is analogous to the evidence assembly of a detective at a crime scene: No stone is left unturned in a concerted attempt to locate what is to be located. Such looking is generated by a suspicion that there is a particular something to be found and involves the recasting of space into an array of previously unnoticed *places to hide things*. An example is provided by a mother who suspected her son of nonmedical drug use:

> I literally turned his room upside down. I never thought of how many places there are that things can be hidden. I looked under the bed, of course, and between the mattress and box spring. I pulled at the corners of the carpet to see if they were loose. I took out all the drawers to see if anything was taped to them or underneath. I went through the books to see if any of them were hollowed out.

An unknown but probably small number of children and adolescents live under the threat of this possibility. Those who do, however, display an immense creativity in choosing a stash locale.

A stash discovered by someone's *motivated looking for something else* is merely come across, revealed in the process of addressing the space under innocent if not legitimate auspices. Apparently, it is common in some households for participants to enter each other's rooms in search of stationery, books, borrowed or to-be-borrowed clothing, and so on. The stash may be encountered as a by-product of such looks:

> I found it when I was looking in her drawer for a T-shirt I'd lent her.

> She said she came across it when she was looking for a pen and some writing paper.

Tales of found stashes suggest that in many households parents have unquestioned access to children's rooms for purposes of performing maintenance and repair duties. Stashes are sometimes discovered in the course of *enacting household routines*:

> It got found one day when the water came pouring through the roof and my father had to *move my desk* to get at the leak.

She *turned the mattress over* and there it was.

My mother found it when she *vacuumed under the bed.*

Stash locales tell us of the child's understanding of household personnel and their features in that they reveal an orientation to a known looker or a set of lookers an assumption that should looking be done it will be done not just by anyone but by particular ones. Indeed, from the point of view of those children and adolescents who provided accounts, the choice of a locale is properly sensitive to the known-about features of those who routinely populate the household. For example, it is alleged that the likelihood that a stash will be discovered is attenuated if it is located in a place where potential lookers have no *interest* in looking:

It was safe there [in the guitar case] because I'm the only one in the family that plays the guitar.

I stashed it in among my comic books because no one ever reads them but me.

Although my mother often looks through the old magazines for something to read she would never look in the box of *Sports Illustrated* because she hates sports.

My sister is always looking for clothes to borrow from me. She never borrows underwear, though, so I hid them in my underwear drawer.

As well, choice of a locale is properly founded in part on knowledge of the *sensibilities* of other household personnel:

There's only my dad and my brother and they'd be too embarrassed to look in my underwear drawer with all my frilly things.

I keep it at the bottom of a box of Maxipads in a cupboard with other feminine hygiene stuff. Even though my brother is anxious to find it he'd be too embarrassed to look in "that" cupboard in my room.

Or a sense of the *time and effort they might be willing to expend* in locating the stash play a role:

Both my brothers are lazy and I can't see them going to all the trouble to get a chair and get up there and go through all the boxes.

Another factor—a process, actually—influencing the selection of a stash locale can be called a *membership-category survey*, that is, an analytic coming-to-terms with the categories of participants populating the unit in which the stasher has membership. Indeed, in many ways rational selection presumes such a

survey. Seen from the point of view of the stasher, the range of possible locales is narrowed by answers to the questions (a) What categories are operative here with respect to this thing? and (b) From which category of the population of unit participants should the thing be concealed? Consider this: Things are hidden from some participants because the stasher has identified them as members of a particular category and used that identification as grounds for concealing things from them in the first place. This, of course, speaks to the observation that some things are stashed in locales that suggest not so much that they not be found as a concern but that they not be found by identifiable personnel. For example, things may be stashed in places secret from parents but well known to siblings:

We [my sister and I] kept it in a false wall we'd built behind our bookcase.

My brother and I stashed a bottle of Southern Comfort under a pile of lumber in the vacant lot next to our house.

Or a boy may stash things in a place potentially frequented by his father and brothers but not his mother:

She would never look in the box of *Sports Illustrated* because she hates sports.

Although some examples may suggest that the operative categories have a fixed and immutable character, this is only apparently the case. Instead, the array of categories in a unit is in constant flux and cannot be determined in advance or be independent of the selection of the stash locale. The selection is both founded and revealing the array, its character, and its size. The selection displays the stasher's understanding of local relationships and alignments. The wise stasher keeps abreast of these and realizes that they are subject to change:

When we were younger, my sister and I used to keep our dope under a ceiling tile in the basement. My sister "got religion" and gave up dope and told me if she found any she'd tell my parents. So now I have to stash it from her, too.

There is no requirement that personnel identified as members of the same category share any feature, save their humanity. This speaks to the observation that some locales reveal the hope that they will be discovered by *no* participant in *any* unit. For example, some might say of their selected locale:

Nobody would ever look in a place like that.

I'm sure I'm the only person that knows that this spot exists.

Some stash locales are judged safe intrinsically, that is, on their own terms and independent of the features of household personnel, the character of looking that might prevail locally, and so on. Such places are *secret places*, ones that no one else knows about.

These are of two sorts. First, and most common by far, is the secret place that is *merely discovered* in the course of addressing a space under other auspices:

There was this space in the wall behind the washing machine that I found while I was trying to get some marbles I'd dropped.

In one part of our basement the ceiling is about a foot lower, to make room for furnace pipe. If you get up on a ladder in the furnace room you can put things in there, through an opening about a foot square. I was up there when I was about eight. I used to be fascinated by pulleys and I was trying to hang one from the ceiling when I saw the hole.

Less common are places *created especially as stash locales*:

We kept it in a false wall we'd built behind our bookcase.

I made a little compartment by carefully cutting a piece out of my floor.

Here I have dealt with hiding things and how, in doing so, the child sustains others' sense of him as a good child.

That children hide things from their parents is, of course, a document of their routine or occasional possession of locally-disapproved objects or evidence that they have been behaving in locally-disapproved ways. *What* they hide, of course, alerts us to their character. Taken together, that and what suggest a straying from the parentally-endorsed self, an erosion of the "openness" that many families promote, and the possibility that socialization has produced surface compliance but not internalization. These observations, however, should be construed as founding pessimism.

Indeed, it is the case that optimism regarding children's progress to competent adulthood can be generated by suspending interest in the *that* and *what* of their concealment and addressing instead the *locales* they choose. As has been shown, these reveal a progressive and eventually sophisticated corpus of ethnographic knowledge and methodological skill.

Note

1. In all, nearly 200 responses were obtained. These ranged in length from single-phrase replies to detailed mini-essays exceeding a page.

   Informants found the questions reasonable and the production of responses doable with considerable ease; none claimed to have to search long or hard for remembered instances and, with one exception, *everyone had something to say*. That this is the case is itself a datum of no little significance, for it suggests that stashing is common in the experience of children and adolescents.

   Temporal location of described stashing varied widely. While some described stashing that happened "today" or "last week," others recalled the activity as it happened "when I was in grade 1" and "when I was 11 or 12." Remarkably, many of these distant recollections displayed as much detail as those temporally closer to the present.

   The bulk of the accounts are descriptive of stashing experience of informants aged 6 to 24, and there is a slight overrepresentation of the the 13-16 year old age group. Males and females responded with almost equal frequency.

Reference

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.