

Nolas, S-M. and Varvantakis, C. (in press) ‘This Parenting Lark’: Idiomatic Ways of Knowing and an Epistemology of Paying Adequate Attention’. In Francisco Martinez, Lili di Puppo and Martin Demant Frederiksen (Eds) *Peripheral Wisdom: Unlearning, Not-Knowing and Ethnographic Limits*. London, Routledge.

‘This Parenting Lark’: Idiomatic Ways of Knowing and an Epistemology of Paying Adequate Attention

Sevasti-Melissa Nolas and Christos Varvantakis

Introduction

In this chapter, we engage with the curious signifier of the ‘idiom’ and raise questions about its relationship to (not) knowing and to peripheral methodologies. Traditionally, the term idiom has been used in anthropological writing to suggest a honing of the researchers’ attention to the vernacular practices being employed by interlocutors to live and make sense of their everyday lives (Nolas, Aruldoss, and Varvantakis 2018). Nevertheless, and as with a lot of linguistic metaphors that find their way into anthropological texts, it is notable that the term has been often used unreflexively, indicating a shared, tacit way of attending to the world. We suggest, however, that this tacit way of attending to the world that is expressed by the term ‘idiom’, encapsulates a particular epistemology of paying attention. We elaborate these arguments further by engaging with the question of how one might arrive at calling something an idiom. If, an idiom is a way of recognising cultural practices and forms of expression, what does that experience of recognition look and feel like – given that meaning is often sedimented in and through practice, with earlier layers not always consciously accessible to researchers, and not always easily codified into written, spoken or visual language (Howes 2003; Behar 1996)?

We draw on fieldwork experiences in Athens and in London from a five-year multimodal ethnographic study that looked at the relationship between childhood and public life as this unfolded in children’s everyday lives. During the Connectors Study we worked with younger children (ages 6-9) from different backgrounds, living in different parts of three cities (Athens, Hyderabad, London) and asked questions about how these children encountered, experienced and engaged with public life.¹ The study took a broadly phenomenological approach and used multimodal ethnography to explore the *relationship* between childhood and public life (Nolas 2015). Public life was understood in terms of ‘associated living’ and ‘communicable experience’ (Dewey 2009; Laplantine 2015), with publics being constituted through vital processes, *forms of connection and relationality* between people, places, objects, humans and non-humans (Fraser, Kember and Lury 2005; Latimer and Miele 2013), which both theoretically and in everyday conversation with children and parents we referred to as what ‘moved’ and ‘mattered’ to children (see Lutz 2017; Sayer 2011).

During the study we spent considerable amounts of time with children in their homes, and occasionally taking walks together in their neighbourhoods and other parts of the city. As such, the home, and its domestic rhythms, was our primary fieldsite. In the study we took a relational and intergenerational approach to understanding childhood and as such, also spent time with parents, mainly mothers, as well as conducting biographical interviews with mothers and some

¹ In this chapter we focus on Athens and London.

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fathers. In addition, one other notable characteristic of the study was that it was focused on families with young children (henceforth, ‘young families’) at the same time as we, in each of our personal lives, were also parents living with toddlers in London and Athens, respectively. As such, two forms of paying attention, the maternal/paternal and the ethnographic, were unwittingly brought together through our biographies and bodies and the young family home made for a curiously familiar fieldsite despite us being strangers to each family.

Our fieldwork across the 26 children in London and Athens, and their families that we got to meet, reflected many of these vicissitudes of young family life we were becoming more and more familiar with as our own children grew closer to the age of the children in the study. And we often responded to these undulations in similar ways in which we might in our own everyday lives: by sometimes not paying attention to what was going on, by being ‘elsewhere’. As ethnographers –trained to pay attention in the ‘here-and-now’, this posed something of a situation to begin with. How did we come to know what we did without seemingly ‘paying attention’ or being ‘there’? We pick up on these experiences of translocation, being disconnected from our physical contexts of co-presence on the one hand, making links with other spatiotemporal contexts and people on the other (Callon and Law 2004), as they took place in two separate afternoons we spent with families in their homes. As such, our chapter also reflects on how we attend to or miss meaning in the field, and what the implications of doing so might be. But before we go there, we provide some background on young families and practices of paying attention in parenting and fieldwork in late modernity.

Paying attention in parenting and fieldwork in late modernity

In the post-industrialised, high-income economies in which the research took place, bringing up young families unfolded to a backdrop of a ‘crisis of childhood’ (Kehily 2010). On the one hand, children’s well-being was endlessly debated and scrutinised in policy and the public sphere. This made everyday, sensual relations (Howe 2003), ways of being together as a family (e.g. eating, playing, talking, sleeping, outings), also and often focused events of ‘children’s development’ where particular modes of attention were called for. As such, childhood, and raising children, especially in middle-class families, was often described by sociologists at the time as intensive or ‘concerted’ (Gillies 2011; Lareau 2003) meaning that childhood required considerable adult investment of time, concern, and thought (Castañeda 2002). Mothering, and increasingly fathering, continued to overlap considerably with the politics of the state, a case of raising ‘good’ (cf. disciplined) citizens (Fraser 1990; King 2016; Kjørholt 2013) to the backdrop of idealized notions of mothering behaviour (Singh 2004). This meant that parenting cultures of scrutiny and blame proliferated (Lee et al. 2014). This crisis of childhood took many forms including the proliferation of endless manuals for consultation (for sleep, for feeding, for relationship management) as well as the emergence of competing ideologies of child-rearing (e.g. ‘helicopter’ vs ‘free-range’ parenting). Across all these domains, being there, being present as a parent, becomes of utmost importance as exemplified for instance in debates about parental mobile phone usage and its relationship to ‘responsible’ and ‘sensitive’ parenting (Kildare and Middlemiss 2017).

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Young family life, as such, in late modernity is an intensive process of paying close attention to every aspect of the growing child and to becoming attuned to their every need and desire to a backdrop of constant barrage of advice. As parents to young children this was a familiar world. Our own experiences of bringing up infants and small children in an era of an intensive parenting was similarly anxiety raising. For example, for one of us her then-infant, toddler and young-child woke several times a night. Her initial response in the early months was to consult and consume sleep manuals, and to obsessively document her child’s sleep ‘patterns’ in the hope of finding a ‘solution’. When such was not forthcoming, the latest sleep book she had been given by a well-meaning acquaintance, who had described the book’s ‘method’ as a panacea, was angrily flung across her living room, the words “don’t ever let me read any of this crap again” directed at her partner.

Methodologies, scales, devices, tricks and the social relations for paying close attention are also of much concern to many contemporary anthropologists (Back 2012; Cook 2018; Stewart 2009; Tsing 2015). The ‘ethnographic eye’ and ‘ear’ have always played a central role in the practice of paying attention in the field, a legacy of the mid-19th century disciplining of the senses. As noted by David Howes (2003), this disciplining involved, amongst other things, the erasure of the body as a source of knowledge, the bodies of those the anthropologist spent time with as well as the anthropologist’s own body. The textual turn, and the ‘reading culture’ metaphor it espoused, which followed later in the 1970s, imparted “a visual and a verbal bias to any analysis” (*ibid*: 19). The practices of observation and notation were centralised in ethnography, while bodily ways of knowing in the field became marginalized.

Such privileging of sight and sound, of seeing and hearing, “bears the imprint of a certain way of imagining the human subject - namely, as a seat of awareness, bounded by the skin, and set over against the world – that is deeply sedimented in the Western tradition of thought” (Ingold 2000: 243). It is also a strange mode of attention in that it asks us to disembody ourselves, to take leave of our senses (Howes 2003), meaning that we are more often preoccupied with our research questions and methodologies instead of perhaps the children’s play we are being recruited into (Nolas and Varvantakis 2019). Yet, as we realised in our own research, to pay attention to our research questions/methodologies, would mean to loosen our attention on the games that were happening in front of us. Being a ‘disciplined’ researcher, focused, observant and attentive, would mean ‘sucking’ at the games that children had recruited us into, and which for them, at that moment, were commanding their full attention. At the same time, these games were not always comprehensible to us, children would often make up their own rules, and sometimes they were also repetitive and boring.

So, what does attention mean in this light: a ‘disciplined’ researcher is attentive, but attentive to what? To not be attentive to the game you are playing and instead be preoccupied with research questions? Or perhaps you find your mind wandering elsewhere? Would this be disrespectful for the person you have in front of you and the activity she’s drawn into (with you)? What is the periphery and the centre of what is going on? And also, what about joy and pleasure – what about if you actually find it more pleasant to *be elsewhere*, somewhere other than the field and in company of your interlocutor? Indeed, does being ‘absent’ even matter? Do we know our interlocutors or our children any less if we let ourselves drift off and be elsewhere?

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In the next section, we present the spaces and rhythms of the young family home, drawing on data from one family in London. We then hone in on experiences of translocation and use data from one family in Athens to further develop our argument. These were experiences of fumbling and not knowing, of being ‘idiotic’, as well as of being ‘present/absent’ in the field (bodies there, minds elsewhere). Unlike the purposive action of tuning into a Walkman (or any other device/playlist combination) that Callon and Law describe (2004) as one practice that produces translocation, these experiences ‘jarred’ us; they caught us unawares. As such, these experiences challenged the sort of attentiveness and presence that is at the heart of contemporary young family life as well as of the ethnographic method; and which left us with the feeling of a transgression having been committed. There were times when we found ourselves disengaged and absent, adrift and peripheral to our fieldsites and interlocutors; and we were often taken by surprise by our momentary absences. We wanted to think about what these experiences might mean for attending to or missing idiomatic meaning in the field and with what, if any, implications. But now, let’s turn towards the vicissitudes of young family life, and of making connections, in all its messiness, its joys, drudgery, and stink.

The spaces and rhythms of young family life

Recently, there has been a systematic attempt to re-engage with bodily knowledge (in post-colonial ways, see Howes 2003) and to, once again, suggest that ethnographers might ‘come to their senses’ by playing attention to a full range of bodily modes of perception including taste and touch (Classen 2005; Csordas 1993; Pink 2009; Seremetakis 1996; Stoller 1997), and in particular the complementarity of different sensory perceptions as modes of knowing. In this section, following a sensory approach, we explore the vicissitudes of ‘young family life’ through one family in London which Melissa visited over a three-year period. The fieldwork account that follows pays attention to rhythms of the day, and the ways in which various bodies make their ways through time and space on that day.

Eleanor and her family lived in an affluent area of North London. A middle-class family, with both parents employed, when I (Melissa) first meet Eleanor she has just become an older sibling. Her brother Tom is only a few months old when I visit the family home for the first time, and Eleanor’s mother Dawn, is on her year of maternity leave.

Visits to children and their families in London were typically carried out in the afternoons and over the weekends. My first visit to Eleanors’ takes place on a Sunday morning. I arrive at the house just before our agreed time of 10am. I hesitate and hover at the threshold, before knocking, knowing that 9-10am can typically be ‘nap time’ for small babies (if you follow some sleep manuals), and I really don’t want to be that person who wakes the (finally) sleeping baby.

Of course, when I do knock and I am let in I discover the equally typical situation of the baby having other plans: baby Ben hasn’t slept and the first time I meet his and Eleanor’s dad, Ben is in his pyjamas, looking tired, and in the process of passing the baby to Dawn so that he can take a shower. I find the encounter awkward.

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The rest of my three-hour stay happens at a languid pace: getting to know each other, doing some research activities, taking a walk to the local bakery, and having lunch together. At some point Eleanor runs out of steam and our time together starts to feel protracted, it’s also time for Eleanor to do her homework. So, I thank her for all her help, we hug, I say goodbye and let myself out.

During the three years we also organised a full day visit to each family, which gave us the experience of the spaces of young family lives as these crisscrossed the home, the street, the school, playgrounds, and often, centres of commerce or entertainment. During the same time, we also became more accustomed to the often disrupted rhythms of young family lives. For example, my day visit to Eleanor’s which took place in mid-June 2015 was one that had to be rescheduled twice: once on account of Eleanor being unwell and once on account of my own child being ill. The visit took place at a time when Eleanor’s dad was travelling, as such, Dawn had been at home on her own with the two children for a few days.

On the day, the rhythms of these visits were fairly similar across the London sample, itself diverse in terms of family compositions, cultural, racial, religious, and economic backgrounds. Mornings typically involved a ‘scramble’ out the door at the same time as making sure that teeth had been brushed, school bags had been packed, children had eaten enough or something, the temporalities of adulthood clashing with the more languid pace of childhood ambling out the home.

Getting out of Eleanor’s house that morning was hectic: Eleanor discovers a hole in her shoe and her water bottle empty at the same time as Dawn discovers that one of her favourite items of clothing has been refashioned with a pair of scissors; it is a tense atmosphere which magically dissipates the moment we all cross the threshold and find ourselves on the street and on our way to the school.

For my part, I find spending the whole day at school with Eleanor exhausting and largely boring. I am not carrying out a study of schools. The classroom feels cramped for an adult body and I resent having to stay in one place, any movements, including going to the toilet or eating determined by an external schedule I have no control over.

After school, Eleanor and I are picked up by Dawn and baby Tom. We go to the art store, where I take the opportunity to pick up a cardboard dinosaur to take home for my son to paint, before heading home via the supermarket. Eleanor and I play in the kitchen, Tom, who is now six months old, tries to join in, eventually it is dinner time. We sit down to a meal of ragu and fried courgettes.

Tom is helping himself in a feeding practice I recognise from my own experimentation in that never-ending battleground of child versus parent versus food, as the latest in middle-class feeding fads, ‘baby-led weaning’, a feeding practice that encourages parents to allow the baby/child to take control of their eating and is supposed to encourage healthy food choices and less of a taste for sugary foods. “I didn’t know you could do baby-led and they would be okay”, Dawn reflects comparing this to the drudgery of mincing baby food which is what she did with Eleanor. I reflect on the pleasure of watching children eat with relish, something I didn’t, at the time, experience at home.

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Dawn and I share a glass of wine over dinner, and I find myself wondering if that’s allowed in that book of fieldwork methodologies that I know doesn’t exist. But it feels okay. It’s been a long day, I struggled through most of it on account of my own disrupted sleep and the challenges of concentrating all day in the year two primary school classroom. In the past, Dawn and I have often exchanged stories of sleep deprivation and on more than one occasion she has said to me: “it’s trying, isn’t it?” Today Dawn says: “it’s nice to have dinner with a grown up now that Ben is away this week”.

Over dinner and dessert Eleanor, Dawn and I talk about second babies (real and imagined), about summer plans, and about having ice-lollies after dinner, Tom happily gobbling up ragu and courgette in his high-chair and interjecting every-so-often with gesticulations for more food.

After dinner Eleanor and I make a bracelet together and play a make-shift pretend game of lacrosse in the backyard where she plunges me back into some of my own (English, romantic) childhood reading: the Enid Blyton series of Malory Towers. For a moment I am back in my own childhood home, a 9-year-old, in her bedroom, the door shut, her back against the balcony window, amassing the rays of winter sunshine, book in hand, devouring a story about absent parents, sisterhood, troublemaking and the forging of an ethical life. I don’t stay there long however, pulled back into the here-and-now by a tennis ball coming my way.

It’s now 7 p.m., it is time for me to leave. I would love to stay longer but my own young family home is beckoning.

I go up to the bathroom to find Dawn who is bathing Tom; he is in the bath propped up in a bath seat. Dawn is sitting on the floor washing him. He is chuckling with abandon, water splashing everywhere. I thank Dawn for her hospitality.

In the meantime, Tom has spat up in the bath and spittle mixed with food is floating in the bath water. Dawn mixes the water around to dissolve the spittle in the same way that I’ve rubbed off dirt on my son’s clothes, when they are not dirty enough for a full wash, and thought ‘that will do, clean enough’.

Dawn says to me as if we’ve been reading each other’s minds that she won’t mention the spittle to Eleanor who will soon be jumping in the bath with Tom. I say “in that case there is a chunk there you may want to make disappear” and she scoops it up with one of the bath toys. We laugh about this and, as I’m leaving the bathroom, she says all of the following things, which I find myself too exhausted and brain-dead to reconstruct into full sentences later in my fieldnotes:

“It’s funny this parenting lark … you can’t lose our sense of humour… and we don’t have to do it perfectly!” “No, just good enough, right?”, I say invoking my much beloved mantra which I never quite manage to adhere to myself, and we both smile at each other.

I leave the bathroom and head downstairs to say goodbye to Eleanor who has no interest in participating in this conventional parting ritual. She is now elsewhere, deep in that childhood practice of building herself a den: the couch, the cushion, and a bunch of sheets for her props.

I have to work hard to get her attention. “Do I get a hug?” I asked her. I really didn’t want to leave without saying anything. She leaves her den-building momentarily and gives me a massive all-embracing hug hanging herself off my body.

We squeeze each other tightly. I thank her for hosting me for the day and wish her a great summer. I’ll see her in the autumn when she is in Year 3. She doesn’t say anything. She untangles herself from me and goes back to ignoring me and building her den.

I let myself out and head for the tube.

Unpacking the idioms of young family life: ‘this parenting lark’

According to the Longman English Dictionary, in colloquial British English, doing something ‘for a lark’ is to do something to amuse oneself, for a joke. The phrase can also be ‘used to describe an activity that someone thinks is either silly or difficult’, or maybe both. As such, Dawn’s description of parenting as “lark” may well be an appropriate idiom for describing relational practices in young family lives. It is delivered with awareness of what often feels like a relentless call for perfection against an ever moving standard, and for doing things the right way, at the same time as being acutely aware that such standards are socially constructed and that there is no one or right way.

As such, ‘this parenting lark’, as an idiom, encapsulates something of an oxymoron: the serious and silly business of bringing up a child. Accordingly, ‘knowing how’ often comes after ‘doing that’, and everyday young family life could be described as proceeding in many ‘idiotic’ ways (Horst and Michael 2011; Michael 2012): children ‘misbehave’, illness ‘disrupts’, stains ‘persist’, solids and liquids ‘overspill’ their containers, toys ‘get in the way’. In Isabelle Stengers’ terms, idiotic figures make us critically reflect on ‘what we are busy doing’, indeed they “suspend the habits that make us believe that we know what we know and who we are, that we hold the meaning of what makes us exist” (2005: 10003). The colouring pens everywhere, mashed up food on the floor, the spew in the bath turn spaces upside-down. Mothers colluding without words in those little meaningless deceits (clean water, clean clothes) that make everyday life more livable. Tentative exchanges about the challenges of doing young family life pass between parents, the fear of being judged for having done it ‘wrong’ never far off. “It’s funny this parenting lark” posed as a question, a hedging of bets in case our interlocutor finds it neither funny nor a lark.

Experiences that suspend our habits of knowing and identification may well send us ‘elsewhere’, as a way of anchoring ourselves anew, as a way of finding pleasure when the larking about tips more to the side of the difficult instead of the funny. It may also be the case that young family life “can entail a range of happenings which, in one way or another, “overspill” the empirical, analytic, or political framings of those [...] events” (Michael 2012: 529). The previous section touched on the issue of ‘translocation’ of absence/presence (Callon and Law 2004: 7) as one example of ‘overspill’. Eleanor’s invocation of Enid Blyton’s boarding school classic sends Melissa back in time to her childhood bedroom, alone, enjoying a book about escapism, away from her family. The drudgery of domesticity and the pleasure of being in a room of one’s own,

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apparently felt by children too, the desire to connect with an ‘elsewhere’, and an ‘other’, ever present.

To understand these experiences of translocation, and how they might inform our recognition of idioms, we have found it helpful to think with phenomenological and sensory anthropology and to consider somatic modes of attention and sensory ways of relating (Howes 2003). The body as “the existential ground of culture” (Csordas 1993: 135) becomes a vehicle through which idioms might originally be created and later (re)produced (Clarke, 1989). As well as responding to the spaces and rhythms of contemporary domesticity, young family homes, and bodies that dwell in them, are also sites of affect and memory with children often positioned as the stirrers of those long forgotten ‘ghosts in the nursery’ (Fraiberg, Adelson and Shapiro 1975). Bodies are nurtured and formed through cooking and eating, stories of generations gone by passed down in the process (Giard 1998; Seremetakis 1994). Love and devotion are communicated through touch and consumption (Miller 2001); agency made visible through housework and home creativity (Pink 2004), themselves an ambivalent affective mixture of autonomy and dissatisfaction, accomplishment and boredom, routine and monotony, fragmentation and repetition, connection and loneliness (Beer 1983; Oakley 1974). Social movements and social change leaving their mark on the domestic, and especially on women’s bodies (Fraser 1990; Hochschild 1989). In the next section, sticking with food, we further elaborate on the theme of absence/presence before concluding with implications.

When ‘makaronia me kima’ is much more than just a plate of spaghetti with mince meat

Food is a way of forging and maintaining relationships and has long been considered central to the rhythms of the young family home and those who dwell within it: to ‘good mothering’, to children’s demonstrations of agency, to our sense of self and belonging (cf. Thomson, Hadfield, Kehily and Sharpe 2012). In the context of Greece food and food sharing is considered to be a culturally significant practice. David Sutton (2006) has written about connections between food and memory, and Nadia Seremetakis (1996) has written on sharing practices of food as shared substance and in relation to the memory of the senses and modernity, while Vassiliki Yakoumaki (2006) has written on food and cultural diversity in the context of Greece’s Europeanization.

Food also had an immense significance in our research, across the three countries and in very many different ways. First of all, the discussions that we had with children about food, about foods they like and foods they hate, as well as about eating constraints they faced and their ways of negotiating those. The sweets and snacks we brought along when visiting the families – which in time became very personalized, as we learnt about our interlocutors’ preferences and their parents’ constraints (often realizing that our visits were ‘special’ occasions, and as such would loosen some constraints) – were also a way of forming relationships, as were, significantly, the meals and snacks we shared with the families and the children interlocutors.

In retrospect, it seems absolutely moving how the families shared their dinners and meals with us (among all other things they shared with us). Such instances where invaluable ethnographic research moments, providing occasions for ‘kitchen table conversations’, sometimes passionate

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and sometimes mundane discussions, which allowed us glimpses into the families’ everyday lives. They also demonstrate the trust and safety that developed in our relationships with the families that enabled talk and gestures to emerge in the first place.²

As far as my experience (Christos) of fieldwork in Athens was concerned, food and food sharing were indeed an important way in which families in the study communicated relatedness, and opened up those relations to me. I often found myself feeling grateful for the invitation and opportunity to share such moments with families, some of which were really enjoyable – in fact, enjoyable to the extent of being distracting. I share below such an instance, of an anthropology of not paying attention.

Food preparation often takes place with a considerable amount of ‘larking’ about in young families. In Athens, Alexandros (9) and Yannis (7) provide us with an example of this. Their parents, Ioulia and Nikos, are professionals in their forties. Ioulia worked occasionally and mostly from home. She was the one who does all the cooking and undertakes most of the domestic work. She liked cooking but she disliked having to cook different things for the two boys – and this is often the case.

Take for instance a meal with pasta, which is a meal they frequently eat. Yannis can’t stand spaghetti, and prefers rather to eat fusilli or other sorts of smaller pasta, while Alexandros only eats spaghetti. Similarly, Alexandros can’t stand (even the smell of) white cheese, and wants to have yellow, dry cheese (such as graviera) with his pasta, while Yannis will only eat his pasta with grated feta cheese. At least, both boys dislike the use of herbs and hot spices in sauces - which in fact she and her husband love. She told me that she will often prepare only the one sauce, without herbs and hot spices, for all of them, in doing so sacrificing her own desires too tired to care for all other details of the meal. At other times, however, she may be more tenacious and despite her tiredness she will also prepare a second sauce for her and her husband. And, though rarely, sometimes she will just prepare the pasta sauce the way she likes it and tell the kids, well that’s it, take it or leave it (although, they will usually then just leave it).

During one of my visits, Ioulia had just prepared lunch. Dishing out the food at the kitchen table, she called for us to come and eat. I got there first, asking her if she needed help with anything, and giving her a hand with plates, napkins and so on. The food smelled amazing. Not just a tasteful smell, rather a smell that felt very familiar, maybe even too familiar, to me. I asked, and she told me that we were having *makaronia me kima* (spaghetti with minced meat) for lunch. This is a pretty typical dish and an all-time favourite of many children in Greece (almost all children in the research, at least, were fans!) The smell however rang a different bell for me.

It wasn’t a usual smell or the smell that *makaronia me kima* have when we cook it at home or when I get it elsewhere. It took some time before the boys made it to the kitchen and we sat and started eating. It was only then, with the first bite, that I realized: it was cooked just the way my paternal grandmother used to cook it! I haven’t had this dish made in this way for over two decades (my grandmother having long passed away), and yet I remembered it exactly – that was exactly it! My favourite version of my favourite childhood dish, and it was there in front of me, a full plate of memory. Around this plate a number of things, mostly long forgotten, started to materialise in

² See also Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss 2019 for kitchen table conversations and political talk.

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my head: my grandmother’s kitchen, her smell, her flowery patterned dresses, the shape of the glasses on the table, the tangerines in the bowl in the center of her table, the patterns of her tablecloths.

Ioulia asked me if I would like a glass of wine, as she was serving herself one. I said no – I guess I would have normally accepted, but the taste experience I was having felt incompatible with wine in that moment – never having had this dish with wine before. On some level, I realized that there were exciting things happening around me, things I probably ought to be paying attention to: Alexandros was talking about how he hates cheese, Yannis wanted a different kind of pasta, both discussing and re-negotiating their preferences with Ioulia, Nikos trying to sneak/negotiate his way out of the kitchen and into the living room to watch cartoons plate in hand, which he eventually managed. But I couldn’t really pay attention to those fine ethnographic details, immersed as I was in my own dish.

Naturally, I had a second serving.

Of ghosts and other sprites

Idioms are particular and sometimes peculiar ways of communicating complex life-worlds. Linguistically they represent phrases the meaning of which is not reducible to individual words (for some fun examples in both English and Greek see the footnotes³). Idioms, as such, are assemblages of meanings and practices, the significance of which is found in their particular configurations. Anthropologically, the challenge with ‘idioms’ at an analytical level is that once recognised they solidify: domesticity (Fraser 1990), playfulness (Varvantakis and Nolas 2019), witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937), and, as we argue here, ‘this parenting lark’, the phenomenologies that constituted them become erased. Once identified, the experiences that led to recognition fall out of this assemblage, and in so falling something of the richness and vitality of the idiom is lost; a vitality that might also involve banal experiences of absence as we have shown here, of being elsewhere, but which still, we would argue, constitute learning and still contribute to the formation of knowledge. It is a little bit of this experience of coming to learn, unlearn and re-learn the idioms of ‘parenting lark’ that we have tried to convey in this chapter.

In particular, we focused on moments of translocation (Callon and Law 2004) experienced by both of us, to think about what might be unlearned and relearned in the oxymoron ‘absent present’. Here we might venture to say a few things based on the preceding analysis: that parenting and fieldwork, alike, can be as stimulating as they can be boring, as rewarding as they can be depleting, and as overwhelming as they can be insignificant, both central to our lives as well as peripheral. Both require attention as well as roaming in the fields of memory; both can be ‘haunted’ by human and non-human actors central to our own relational worlds (Roseneil 2009).

³ Idioms of joy: ‘over the moon’/‘is someone peeling eggs for you?’(‘αυγά σου καθαρίζουν;’); idioms of falling in love: ‘head over heels’/‘s/he bit the steel metal sheet’ (‘δάγκωσε την λαμπτήνα’); idioms of weather: in Greek ‘it’s raining chair legs’(‘βρέχει καρεκλοπόδαρα’) /‘it’s raining cats and dogs’.

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Some of the ghosts that haunted us are apparent in the lines of text: Enid Blyton and Christos’s paternal grandmother, for instance. Other ghosts make their presence felt between the lines: second wave feminist interpretations of domesticity on the one hand, and love on the other. Second wave feminist approaches to domesticity focus on women’s oppression and unremunerated labour – physical, practical and mental – in the running of households. The feelings of anger and disappointment that inequalities in the home create are well documented, especially as these relate to women’s lives (Hochschild 1989; Oakley 1974). But, as Sarah Pink (2004) notes, and without diminishing the impact of these continued structural inequalities, such feelings are only one part of the affective circuits of home cultures. It took a few drafts to loosen the hold that the second wave feminist narrative had on at least the first author’s imagination, in order to allow the possibility of (an)other interpretation of the domestic and of young family lives to emerge.⁴

What, we might ask, emerges from the here-and-now from this processual interplay of opposites and the momentary glimpse of the secret worlds of thoughts (Ehn and Löfgren 2010)? Paying attention to inattention, we would argue, is important because it reminds us how we do not attend to our fieldsites as blank canvases, we attend with a history and a biography, and so do our interlocutors. It allows us to move out of the “flat world of most sociological accounts of relationships and families to incorporate the kinds of emotional and relational dimensions that are meaningful in everyday life” (Smart 2007: 3), and which, as Sasha Roseneil (2009) observes, are too easy to gloss over in, long-disenchanted societies currently in the grip of late modernity’s individualization. What comes to matter to us, as this is shaped historically, culturally and politically, becomes visible through these oxymorons, and paying attention to these oxymorons, opens the path to a human psychology that can be reimagined as less individual and more social, relational and political (Lutz 2017: 181). The vital processes we describe become ways of understanding ‘shared global predicaments’, a kind of analytical solidarity, an identification of what lies between and connects one and one another and as such, also present aspects of political and ethical life. They offer, as Catherine Lutz concludes, “ways of talking about personhood as genuinely relational or transpersonal, beyond even what psychoanalytic theory offered” (*ibid*: 189).

Being inattentive, therefore, is itself an important part of fieldwork and everyday life. It is in these times of inattentiveness that we make our relatedness as persons visible to our interlocutors (whoever they may be), because we reveal ourselves to be human with an inner life. This in turn makes it possible to see interlocutors as having their own inner lives and allows us to forge relationships and shared understandings with them. It is arguably in moments of loss of focus that we might also learn anew, when gaze replaces learnt vision (Grassani 2004), or tone replaces sounds, sensation replaces taste, and movement replaces gesture, that we are human otherwise. These are spaces and times which can connect us to some other, to more peripherally-aware experiences and modes of knowledge. As such, these moments of translocation are perhaps less about absence, or of being elsewhere, and invoke instead a full engagement with the textures, tastes and sounds of the sensorium we were presented with: a book, a story, a plate of food. Being fully in the moment, we abandoned ourselves to those moments, letting ourselves be enraptured by flavours and recollections. By abandoning ourselves to those moments we found ourselves in touch

⁴ Callon and Law (2004) caution us not to treat our ‘oxymorons’ as fixed coordinates proposing instead that the oxymoron of ‘absent/present’ or ‘present/absent’ might be more productively engaged with as a permanent existential question in the understanding of the here-and-now.

with our field, the field of childhood and childhood experiences. This different plane of attention prompted recollections of our own experiences of childhood publics ('reading publics'), as well as foregrounding missing public discourses on 'parenting', namely those of love. In our text, love, hovers playfully, a sprite, between the lines of text.⁵

In writing about our experiences, we bracketed out the 'love' that we experienced both in the presence of the children and their families, as well as in the memories that these encounters evoked. The comforts of the home, of family members with each other, and with the ethnographer-stranger. The pleasures of eating, of drinking and of conversation, opportunities for connection and a momentary relief from drudgery and, possibly also, loneliness, and a reprieve from spending a whole day with children alone. A child's body, dangling off an adult frame, in an unambiguous and silent gesture of goodbye; and a suggestion that meaningful connections are not just the preserve of family life. Melissa's own reflections upon leaving Eleanor's home after that first visit, were that the family "gave the impression of a close-knit, *loving* family. Dawn used a lot of *affectionate* nicknames when talking to both her daughter and husband" (Melissa's fieldnotes, 25 January 2015; emphasis added). Our own recollections are no less seeped in love.

So why is this sprite only presenting itself now, coaxed out of us by one of the editors, disrupting any possible conclusion to interpretation? Is it because, in its often idealised form, it clashes so spectacularly with its much messier lived experience? Or perhaps it is because, in terms of 'oxymorons', we would also need to talk about the 'hate' and 'cruelty', or at the very least 'ambivalence' (Parker 2005; Rose 2018; Robb 2020), and preferred instead to focus on an idiom, 'this parenting lark', which like other idioms (Clarke 1989; Foss 2002), makes it possible to express darker, less socially acceptable emotions, in a palatable way? Could it be that anthropological fixation with reciprocity leaves no room for love (Venkatesan et al. 2011)? Conversely, might it be that the joy and pleasure that love (in its different guises) can bring about, appear suspicious in research and we are unsure what sort of knowledge they create? Or were we simply not paying attention in the analysis and writing of this chapter? Maybe love was another idiotic figure vying for our attention when we had simply had enough of suspending our habits of knowing and identification, too undone already to be undone any further?

We end this chapter with a recipe, as both an idiom of relatedness as well as that elusive epistemology for paying (in)attention. As argued in the text above, idioms once recognised become solidified, they become a recipe, a plate of food – a characteristic mode of expression, originally peripheral. Yet at the same time, and as our analysis of our ethnographic data suggest, these recipes and foods, solidified as they are in the present, on a page and on a plate, emerge from practising relatedness, infused with affect and loaded with memories. Somewhere there between the lines, if you look hard enough, and with a little bit of stirring, peripheral wisdom might start to emerge before your senses. Maybe even love.

⁵ Such is the 'crisis of childhood' that love rarely makes into public debates of young family life (for exceptions see Gerhardt (2003) and Gopnik (2016) psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist respectively). Earlier versions of this text wrestled with a number of technical terms (attachment, cultures of relatedness) in what we eventually settled to call relationships.

A recipe for the minced meat sauce – as best as Christos could reconstruct it:

Ingredients:

Half a kilo thickly minced meat from beef rump (with fat).

100ml olive oil.

100ml tomato paste (highly condensed).

One-two garlic cloves

A large onion

A glass of rose wine (an old wine preferably)

Five-six dried clove flowers

One-two bay leaves

A cinnamon stick

Method:

In a pot on high heat we put the oil and the garlic for two minutes, until the oil heats. We season the meat with black pepper. We add the minced meat, cloves and cinnamon in the olive oil and mix until the meat becomes pink-brown. We add the onion, mix gently and pour the wine. We let it boil for five minutes and add the bay leave and tomato paste and lower the heat significantly (keep it very low). We let it cook for about two hours.

Acknowledgements

Research for this paper was funded by European Research Council, ERC-StG-335514 to Dr. Sevasti-Melissa Nolas. We would like to thank Dr Rebecca Reynolds for her insightful and valuable feedback on an earlier draft of the paper, as well as the editors Francisco Martinez and Lili Di Puppo.

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