(An)Archive

Childhood, Memory, and the Cold War

Edited by MnemoZIN

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Mnemo ZIN (eds), *(An)Archive: Childhood, Memory, and Cold War*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0383

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ISBN Paperback: 978–1-80511–185–6
ISBN Hardback: 978–1-80511–186–3
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978–1-80511–187–0
ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978–1-80511–188–7
ISBN HTML: 978–1-80511–190–0

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0383

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11. Children on their Own: Cold-War Childhood Memories of Unsupervised Times

Nadine Bernhard and Kathleen Falkenberg

Childhood in formerly socialist countries is often depicted in research as 'organised' or 'uniform'—a perspective we challenge in this paper. Using collective-memory work, we analyse our own childhood memories from the late GDR and memories taken from the memory archive of the Reconnect/Recollect project, focusing on unsupervised times, when institutional access to child supervision was no longer available and adult supervision could not (yet) be guaranteed. With this focus, we broaden existing literature on post/socialist childhood, which mainly focuses on institutionalised settings. Our analysis finds three patterns of unsupervised times present across different memory stories—unsupervised times perceived as freedom and contentment, responsibility, and loneliness. These patterns show that unsupervised times created opportunities for important children's experiences to take place—from being creative to imitating adults, breaking rules, and building communities with peers and siblings. Additionally, we find many similarities across geopolitical boundaries that break down the stereotypical dichotomies of childhoods between the 'East' and the 'West'.

As it is often the case in qualitative research, this chapter started off as an observation, a self-reflective moment that happened to us while sharing

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memories of our childhoods in the former GDR (German Democratic Republic). Sitting together on a balcony in a now-hip neighbourhood in what used to be socialist East Berlin, chatting about particular memory stories we had written down earlier, we came to a realisation. We had not explicitly planned it, but many of the situations we recalled were ones in which we were on our own as children: enjoying ourselves alone or with other children, doing forbidden things while left alone at home. Feelings of loneliness and being overwhelmed also came to mind. This perspective on children being on their own, their struggles and experiences, was in stark contrast to the uniform picture typically painted in research and even the media about childhood in the GDR.

We started wondering why time spent alone as children left such a lasting impression on our personal childhood memories and what shared qualities of these recollections could be insightful for other memory stories of childhood in formerly socialist countries or Cold-War childhoods. These questions have led us to many fruitful conversations, helped us develop analytical concepts and turned a chat on the balcony into a new and ongoing research endeavour (see also Falkenberg and Bernhard, forthcoming). This chapter is, thus, an attempt to summarise our thoughts at this moment in time, knowing that this project is far from complete.

The starting point for our writing and thinking about childhood memories as a data source for research on Cold-War childhoods was the international, collaborative, and multidisciplinary project Reconnect/Recollect. As participants in a memory workshop in Berlin, we created our first memory stories, contributing to an ever-growing online memory archive[1] as a way of gaining insights into post/socialist childhoods. We believe that even though memories are selective constructions of the past, they can serve as fruitful sources for a more nuanced analysis of everyday life and childhoods in formerly socialist countries. Memory stories provide insight into childhoods in specific socio-cultural contexts and highlight the social structures that helped shape everyday life. At the same time, childhood memory stories and their details, emotions, materialities, embodiments, and sensations illustrate how memories are intertwined with notions of childhood

1 See https://coldwarchildhoods.org/memories/

prevalent in societies and wider socio-political matrices of power, divisions, and connections (Silova et al. 2018).

How children experienced everyday life is still a less frequently explored approach to research on Cold-War childhoods compared to the extensive literature on childhood-related institutions such as kindergarten, school, or political mass organisations, and their aim of creating the new, socialist person. In contrast to well-established narratives about a supposedly uniform state-organised childhood in formerly socialist countries, in our analysis, we focus on times of the day when institutional access was no longer available and adult supervision could not (yet) be guaranteed—for example, weekday afternoons before parents came home from work or weekend hours when children were sent out to play. We ask how these unsupervised times were spent and what limitations, rules and arrangements there were for these times of the day in order to reflect upon children's agency, the opportunities, challenges, and responsibilities 'being alone' comprised for children, and in which societal structures these were embedded. By analysing Cold-War childhood memories of unsupervised times, we take a perspective on 'social, economic, political, and cultural formations' and everyday spaces in which ignorance, 'dissent, transgression, and resistance' to official ideologies and mandates took place (Millei et al. 2019, p. 327).

After presenting our conceptualisation of unsupervised times, we will discuss several memory stories—some our own and some obtained from the memory archive—grouping them under three main topics: (1) unsupervised times perceived as freedom and contentment, (2) unsupervised times as responsibility, and (3) unsupervised times as loneliness. By including manifold memory stories with different geopolitical and socio-historical backgrounds into our analysis, we explore similarities and differences in the experience of unsupervised times for children—both across and within Cold-War related pictures of 'the West' and 'the East'. Finally, reflecting on our own work with the memory archive, we discuss the possibilities (and limitations) of the archive, seeking to shift the focus to connections and similarities between the 'East' and 'West' in various spheres of life (Millei et al. 2019). The approach of working with childhood memories offers the possibility of opening up existing structures that marginalise knowledge production from post/socialist spaces (Millei et al. 2019) and overcoming familiar

but one-sided images of the Cold-War world reproduced through dichotomies such as capitalism/socialism, religious/atheist, imperialist/liberalist (Silova et al. 2017). Nevertheless, working with memory stories from a variety of places and times is a challenging task that requires nuanced contextual knowledge and reflexivity from the involved researchers. We thus conclude our chapter with a short discussion of these issues.

Conceptualising Unsupervised Times

German educational history research on GDR childhoods has so far focused mostly on childhood institutions like kindergarten, school or mass youth organisations and their role in educating socialist citizens. Such scholarship has often reduced children to passive recipients of ideological propaganda, depicting them as members of collective institutions, often in uniforms and/or at mass organisation events (for an overview see Geißler and Wiegmann 1995; Tenorth 2010). To our knowledge, there is a corresponding lack of international research on unsupervised, non-institutional times in Soviet or Cold-War childhoods, leaving a huge research gap with respect to how childhood was experienced outside of those institutions. Although perspectives from formerly socialist states that are not traditionally part of the hegemonic knowledge discourse on socialist childhoods are increasingly being published (for example, see Silova et al. 2018), these too often focus on childhood in institutionalised spheres, such as kindergarten and school (see for example, the papers included in a recently published Special Issue edited by Teszenyi et al. 2022).

The predominant perspective in research on GDR childhood postulates highly standardised life paths, resulting in a 'standard biography of children' in the GDR as compared to West Germany (Grunert and Krüger 2006, p. 65). It is this monolithic idea of GDR childhood—or childhoods in formerly socialist countries more generally—as 'organised' or 'uniform' that we wish to challenge. We focus on the hours of the day when institutional care had ended and other adult supervision was not available, a time usually referred to as leisure time, free time, or after-school hours in contemporary childhood studies (Sharp et al. 2006). Going beyond such research, we suggest

applying the concept of unsupervised times to analyse childhood memories from socialist countries for several reasons.

Firstly, we understand unsupervised times as a productive irritation of the established view of a uniform, singular 'socialist childhood' mostly happening in institutional settings by highlighting the importance of non-institutional, everyday childhood experiences. These help to provide a more complex, more comprehensive picture of socialist childhoods (in plural).

Secondly, unsupervised times encompasses all of children's activities performed and experiences gained on their own as part of their everyday routines (on weekdays as well as weekends), including household tasks and chores as well as joyful activities like playing and relaxing, but not organised extracurricular activities like music lessons or sports. This differs from the concept of leisure time, which can be spent with parents or other adults as well.

Thirdly, while highlighting children`s independence, the concept of unsupervised times acknowledges their irrevocable connection to the adult world. Even though adults were not physically present in the memories analysed in this chapter, elements of the adult world still structured how the children spent their time. Examples of those relational connections include schedules and chores but also internalised norms of good and bad as well as parental influences on children's feelings and thoughts. The adult world is an absent presence that is tangible in all the childhood memories analysed for this chapter.

Finally, our concept of unsupervised children is related to negatively connotated ideas of 'supervised' childhoods as well. Supervision of children in socialist contexts evokes notions of control, a need to regulate children and put them under adult surveillance and guidance to integrate them into a collective in which they suspend their individual needs, wishes, and desires for the greater good. In addition to those negative notions, we discovered multiple layers of supervision built into unsupervised time, sometimes related to children's safety and well-being, as well as a complete lack of supervision when children were entrusted with a certain task. From a contemporary childhood-studies perspective, the notion of unsupervised children is often linked to a discourse of risk and fear, stressing potential dangers of unsupervised time for children's well-being and development. While the degree

of adult supervision decreases as children become older and more independent, contemporary discourses regarding at-risk youth point to unsupervised time as a missed learning opportunity or a cause of higher rates of drug abuse (Badura 2018). However, recent research also emphasises the value of noninstitutionalised and unsupervised time for independent play as beneficial for children's social, emotional, and physical well-being (Rixon et al. 2019). Time to play alone has reportedly been decreasing in recent decades—especially in the global North—due to parental anxieties about children's safety (ibid.) and parents' desire to maximise their children's educational achievement via organised after-school activities. Even though unsupervised times seem more typical of the past and are often reflected upon as positive, we would like to stress that numerous structures in society and in individual families necessitate(d) unsupervised times. These structures include rates of female labour-force participation and a lack of adequate childcare opportunities, parental values, but also social inequality.

Following educational research on childhood and childhood studies, we understand childhood as a social construction and as a specific phase of life with its own social status (Mierendorff 2019). We conceptualise childhood as part of the social structure and its institutional and cultural context and are interested in these interrelations. Since childhood conditions within modern societies are highly diverse, we aim to reflect the heterogeneity of children's experiences and biographical diversity, thereby resisting ideas of a single, uniform childhood.

Memory Stories of Unsupervised Times

In this paper, we combine our own collective memory work on childhood memories in the former GDR with an analysis of memory stories collected through the Reconnect/Recollect project and saved in the memory archive. We understand childhood memories as an analytical perspective and as a data source. We recognise that memories—as selective constructions of the past, not a linear representation of the past or what 'really' happened—are constructed by those who tell them, shaped by the present, and modified by the accounts of others. Memories are, therefore, creations and, in some ways, 'unreliable' (Davies and Gannon 2006, p. 3). The employment of collective biographical processing of

memories, that is, 'the shared generation and analysis of systematically recalled memories' (Millei et al. 2019, p. 2), is a productive and reflexive way to work with memories as data.

In our collective memory work and in the memory workshops, we followed the steps recommended by Frigga Haug (1991) as well as Davies and Gannon (2006) on collective biography. Central to each of these is the collective evocation and analysis of written memories on a delimited subject, for example, unsupervised times in our childhood, 'to explore the effects of structural, systemic, discursive and affective processes on the emergence of particular subjects, such as [...] the gendered subject [...] or the child subject' (Millei et al. 2019, p. 2). It is, thus, a collective research approach that attempts to work out overarching patterns of action and interpretation as well as subjectivisations through method-guided systematic work with memories.

Our own memories of unsupervised times were first written down and collected by each author individually. Then we read each other's memory stories, scanned them for inconsistencies, clichés, or standardised formulations and reformulated them if necessary. We paid particular attention to our own positionality as authors of those stories, reflecting on what kind of childhood experiences we can shed light upon—or not. In the subsequent analysis of our own stories, we discovered three patterns of memories related to unsupervised times: unsupervised time (1) perceived as freedom and contentment, (2) as responsibility, and (3) as loneliness. In a second step, we then analysed the Reconnect/Recollect memory archive to compare and expand the analysis of our own memories. Can we find similar or new overarching patterns? Do we find differences between socialist and non-socialist memories of unsupervised times? These were the questions that informed our analysis.

The archive consists of more than 250 memory stories collected, for example, during memory workshops, expositions, and conferences and written in several languages, but mostly in English. Thus, our starting point was our own language skills, enabling us to include all 237 memories written in German, English, or Spanish.[2] In a first step, we preselected all memories in which children were described outside of

2 In this paper, we refer to the database content published until February 2022. Memories included afterwards are not part of our analysis.

an institutional setting like school, kindergarten, or afterschool care and in which there was no clear adult supervision. Of these 111 memories, we decided in a final selection process to concentrate on memories depicting children up to age 12, with no adults physically present, and we restricted the memories to everyday life; recollections of special events like vacations or holidays were excluded. The age restriction enables us to focus on children rather than teenagers, who usually become more independent as they get older. Moreover, this age range is also in line with our own memories from the GDR. The final sample included 27 memory stories. Since these stories were written by other people and are not our own memories, we employed Grounded Theory methodology for the analysis of this data. Following basic recommendations (Corbin and Strauss 2015), we focused on distinguishing who does what, how, with whom, why, and where in those memory stories. In this way, we were able to identify overarching patterns and narratives revealed in the memories rather than examining every single memory story in depth, a necessary restriction given the rather large number of selected stories.

The memory stories we analysed came from 17 geopolitical entities.[3] The majority were from formerly socialist countries like Romania, Poland, or the GDR, but other countries such as West Germany, Australia, and Finland were also part of the selection. This allows us to look at childhoods during the Cold War in both capitalist and socialist countries. In the memories, the children were alone, with siblings, or with friends or peers. In analysing the memories from the archive, we could not detect a new overarching pattern that would expand our previous research—a rather surprising first result. However, the memories in the archives were not produced with a focus on unsupervised times, unlike our own sample. This might have had an effect. Nonetheless, our own analysis is strengthened by the fact that the three patterns we did identify are repeated in the memories from different contexts. Furthermore, thinking about collectively produced memory stories as data, we then decided to take advantage of the opportunity to examine the social structures represented in those stories. Social structures can be determined with respect to several foci, including gender relations,

3 Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, Finland, West Germany/FRG, East Germany/GDR, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Yugoslavia.

family structures, urban structures, but we focused on knowledge structures, namely the narratives about unsupervised times represented in the memories. In the following, we present the three overarching patterns and the occurrence of typical narratives therein. We use our own memory stories to interpret these patterns in more depth, but we also incorporate examples from the memory archive.

Unsupervised Times as Freedom and Contentment

The first pattern refers to memories in which time spent alone as a child was perceived as freedom, as a period without (or at least with less) parental or institutional regulation. It is perceived as time that children can fill with activities of their own choosing. In the stories in the archive, the pattern of unsupervised time perceived as freedom and contentment could be found in stories describing the walk home from school or from other activities, stories about skipping school, how children played in- or outdoors or how children organised celebrations at their houses. This was the pattern that dominated in most of the analysed memories.

Nevertheless, the perceived freedom described in the memories takes place within a temporally and spatially structured, adult-driven day, leaving only small pockets of time. The result is a rather conditional freedom dependent on complex societal and familial arrangements.

In the memories about children being alone and enjoying themselves, moments of boredom give rise to new activities, as the following example shows:

[...] *she takes her Gummihopse* [*elastics or jump rope*] [...] *out of her satchel, sets up the two wooden chairs in the children's room and stretches the rubber band under the chair legs. The distance between the bands is wider than if her friends were standing there, but she bounces happily back and forth, always thinking up new difficulties. She pretends to be in a competition and gives herself posture scores like in figure skating.* ('Gummihopse' n.d., East Germany/GDR)

Apart from the obviously playful activity the girl in the story invents for herself to pass the afternoon on her own, the story provides deeper insights into societal structures. The reference to figure-skating competitions is probably no coincidence since the sport became increasingly popular as

a field in which GDR athletes were able to achieve international success during the 1980s. At the same time, competitions in general were a part of children's everyday experience: for example, schoolchildren were publicly awarded prizes for good grades, and competitions for the 'most beautiful schoolyard' were announced. In other areas of society, competitions served to honour particularly productive members of socialist society. The child's play in this example invites us to look into broader social mentalities and, thus, points beyond itself. A careful analysis enables us to understand how everyday life, even on a small scale, was shaped by societal structures.

In this brief snippet of a memory story, we can, furthermore, identify two narratives that appear repeatedly in other stories. We understand the term 'narratives' here as shared interpretations and understandings of children's actions described as typical of (unsupervised) childhoods. They are inseparably linked to socially shared ideas and scripts represented not only in these memories but also in research concerning children's development and socialisation into society as well as in contemporary societal discourses.

The first narrative is one of 'childhood as a time for creativity, playing, and trying things out with available materials'. In the memory archive, for instance, we found children playing intensively with mud, making watercolours out of what nature offers, or staging a fashion show with existing clothes. Thus, in contrast to the potentially more consumerist present, where children often play with store-bought toys, the children in the memories create something with the help of ordinary things. Following Gaskins et al. (2007), these representations reflect 'culturally accepted play'—a type in which children play together, often unsupervised by adults, in spaces not particularly structured for play, and with naturally available objects rather than store-bought toys.

In the story above, the girl is also creative and plays with everyday objects that are available. In place of friends, the child uses chairs to be able to do what she likes. She also imitates adults, who use scores to competitively evaluate actions. Here again, we can see how the norms of the adult world influence children's actions even in the physical absence of adults. 'Imitation of the adult world' is the second narrative we frequently found when analysing the memories. Research has often emphasised that children's growth and development are strongly

dependent on their capacity for imitation. When children play, they often imitate adults by staging events they witnessed or stories they listened to (Noschis 1992).

This imitation of the adult world is also prominent in the following memory from the archive:

Every day, after school, on her way home, she would stop at her best friend's house where they played and played and forgot about time. They explored many forbidden things. Adult things. [...] *They felt they could do just about anything together. One day, must have been in second grade* [...] *her friend told her she discovered a secret, a treasure behind the porcelain figurines displayed in the glass windowed cupboard in the living room: a packet of Kent cigarettes. The best cigarettes in the world. A rare commodity, not available to everyone, as they somehow sensed.* [...] *It was a Western brand, most certainly American, a symbol of privilege.* [...]. *I already tried one, and believe me, it's great, the friend confessed. Let's smoke one together. Oh yes, it will be so cool to do it! Let's smoke it at the balcony window and do the gestures like the women in the movies do, when they smoke. The passers-by will see us and be amazed how grown-up we are.* ('The Secret' n.d., Romania)

With grown-up women from the movies in mind, the two girls try to imitate them to look cool and grown-up themselves. They anticipate amazement rather than astonishment from passers-by who see two young girls smoking. What we also witness in this memory is that the two girls are best friends and their doing something forbidden together creates an even stronger bond between them because they share secrets. The secret in this memory is particularly big because they decide to smoke not normal cigarettes but hidden ones from the capitalist West, a 'symbol of privilege'. The memory shows us that Western products were very rare in these families and perceived by the children as something extraordinarily precious. This feeling might stem from the children's observations of the silent gestures of adults. Alternatively, it might reflect the conversations they heard about Western goods in comparison to the more limited selection of Eastern-bloc products, thus reproducing the image of scarcity and low-quality Eastern products.

The memory also displays two further typical narratives. First, we see 'unsupervised childhood as a time to do forbidden things, share and keep secrets, break rules, and test the limits'. In childhood-development

studies, these are important developmental steps for children in which they not only interact with and uphold or resist societal norms but also develop their identities (see, for example, Piaget 2015 [1932]; Valtin 2020). The second narrative concerns 'unsupervised childhood as a time of community and cohesion' with peers and siblings, often by sharing secrets. Children are described as learning and acting together, building communities, and attempting to belong. Again, siblings—and even more so peers—are widely recognised as playing an essential role in the children's development and their becoming independent from parents and other adult guardians (see, for example, Berndt and Ladd 1989; Hoffmann 2022).

Unsupervised Time as Responsibility

The second pattern within the memory stories highlights the conditional nature of the abovementioned perceived freedom. In our memories, afternoon time was often structured by various chores assigned to children, like cleaning the house, watching younger siblings, or running small errands. These tasks fulfilled several functions: children were taught to be independent early on and to learn important life skills. They were also expected to help out at home to relieve working parents (or, rather, mothers) from household chores. Furthermore, chores served as a form of control by parents or other adults: the assignment of tasks shrank to a minimum the period in which children were left to their own devices and, thus, might get into 'trouble'. These temporal and spatial limitations created what we term 'conditional freedom' for children. Through the chores and tasks they assigned, parents and other adults were still present in absence, indirectly controlling children's activities, as seen in the following example:

The girl is on her way back from school. Today she is supposed to pick up her little brother from kindergarten [...]. *The brother is only two years younger, but in her eyes, he is still a baby. After all, she is already a schoolchild! The kindergarten is right next to the school* [...] *the kindergarten teachers are already waving at her.* [...] *One of the women calls her brother. He comes through the gate to meet her, they both wave again to the teachers and then they walk off together. Always alongside the fence, through the narrow path that leads to their housing block, passing the mountains of sand at the building site next to it.* [...] *But,*

oh, the little brother walks so darn slowly, constantly wanting to pick up stones and put them in his pocket or climb the mountains of sand. The girl pulls at his hand and wants to keep going. They shouldn't dawdle, Mum said. And at home Gabi, the nice neighbour, is waiting. The girl likes to be with Gabi […] *she will have something sweet for them.* ('Kindergarten' n.d., East Germany/GDR)

It was quite common for older children to look after their younger siblings for some time in the afternoon, even though the provision of day-care slots and after-school care was quite comprehensive in the 1980s in the GDR (Kirchhöfer 2000). This is reflected in the matter-of-fact interaction with the kindergarten teachers in the story, who immediately call the brother and hand him over to his not-very-much-older sister. They do not question a young child of roughly seven years of age picking up an even younger child and sending both on their way home. It remains unclear from the story if the kindergarten personnel knew about the neighbour waiting for the children—someone who would start looking for them in case of emergency—but with both parents working, such a 'bridging practice' between institutional care and parental or other adult supervision was necessary for many families (Kirchhöfer 2000, p. 196). Maternal employment was strongly encouraged since the 1950s, a response to politically normative claims regarding gender equality as well as economic necessity, but it required care work to be re-organised. Other factors, like long commutes between state-assigned housing and the workplace as well as restricted opening hours for shops, also made it difficult for working adults to run everyday errands, meaning that a 'developed familial division of labour' (Kirchhöfer 2000, p. 194) was common and necessary.

In the memory story above, it becomes apparent that the older child takes over the adult role to a certain extent, and the narrative of imitating the adult world pops up once again. The schoolchild takes the younger child by the hand—and thus under her control—and leads him home. She has little patience for the younger child's actions, such as picking up stones. We can almost hear the adult voice in her head when she reminds him not to dawdle, not to waste time, a typical argument of adults. Only at the end of the story can a glimpse of the child be seen, with the hope of sweets and thus a reward for the successful completion of the care task. Fostering children's independence expressed great confidence in their abilities. But, of course, placing high expectations and sometimes

excessive demands on children could also reflect an 'imposition of independence' (Kirchhöfer 1998, p. 194) that overburdened children, as other stories show.

The second pattern—of unsupervised times as responsibility—was rare in the memory archive. Running errands or taking care of siblings are typical examples. However, sometimes moments of responsibility could also be experienced as times of freedom, as shown in the following example:

She must have been in first or maybe second grade, around the age of seven. She was the eldest child in the family with three younger siblings, the youngest being a baby, causing the mother to stay, even stick to the house. So the older children had to do errands from time to time. She was often asked to do the shopping, thus going to the grocery store [...]. *Although it could be annoying sometimes, she could go out even if the weather was not so nice* (*to play outside for example*). *The family had to be careful with the money because the income was not very high and the family was big, which meant a lot of sharing.* [...] ('Pink Sweets' n.d., West Germany)

This memory story adds a twist to the second pattern, expanding our view. Again, the child in the story needs to take over household tasks to support her mother. As the oldest child in a big family, she is supposed to act more grown-up than her younger siblings. Under these circumstances, being responsible and having to do chores could actually turn into something enjoyable: for a little while, she could escape the constricting family setting, be on her own, take her time, and play outside, even if the weather was bad. These were moments of freedom, even though framed by a household task.

This memory story shows that we need to keep in mind that the identified patterns are meant to work as analytical categories; the goal is not to force the stories to fit one or another of these categories. As the story continues, it plays out one of the narratives mentioned earlier—the narrative of unsupervised times as time for breaking the rules:

One day she went shopping again and, in the supermarket, she was passing by the sweets which always looked so attractive and colourful; and she saw a bag of sweets open and spread on the shelf. Could she take them? Why not? An open bag would not be sold, and the pink colour was so seductive. Still, was it

ok to take one? Well, it must be, no harm would be done to anyone. Yet, being caught while taking it was not something she wanted to experience. She must have looked around if anyone was near or looking, or maybe even waited until it was out of sight. When she was sure, she took one. Then, she went to the cashier and paid for the other things. How she got out of the supermarket is not a clear memory, but she must have hidden it. On the way back home, she ate it, yummy. At the same time, she knew she was doing something wrong and felt so embarrassed. She never told her mother or anyone else but promised herself never to do such a thing again. ('Pink Sweets' n.d., West Germany)

Several things can be highlighted here: It is a very mundane situation from today's perspective, but obviously an open bag of candy spilled all over the shelf makes quite an impression on the child in the story. Maybe sweets in general are something precious in her family and she does not get them very often since the family is on a tight budget. She is well aware of the limitations that come with their financial constraints.

Then, although the child is on her own in the shop, she debates with herself—in her mind—about whether or not to take the sweets. She knows the rules, she has internalised some adult norms about good and bad, about stealing, taking stuff without paying. Finally, she takes one sweet because she tells herself they would be thrown away anyway. The child already knows how supermarkets deal with damaged goods or broken packages. She understands basic mechanisms of commerce in capitalist countries, and with that knowledge, she finds a way to be ok with breaking the rule of not stealing. She observes the shop, waiting for the right moment, and then takes one, and only one, candy. Taking one rather than several or even the whole bag might indicate how highly she values this piece of candy. She does not dare to take more. We can see in the story that it is the child acting, debating with herself and then ultimately taking the sweets, but it is the rules and norms of the adult world that convert this small incident into something very memorable for the grown-up narrator even decades later.

Again, however, memory stories of unsupervised times as responsibility were quite rare in the sample from the archive. Maybe those times were not remembered or written down because the memory workshops focused on other main topics, meaning that other stories were more likely to be written down.

Unsupervised Times as Loneliness

We have seen that unsupervised time—although pre-structured and conditioned—can facilitate creativity, a sense of responsibility and independence in children. But at the same time, it can pose great challenges and lead to a feeling of being (left) alone or loneliness. This is the third pattern we discovered in our memories. In this pattern, we can see how much children are emotionally dependent on the adults caring for them, how vulnerable and desperate they might feel when those support figures are absent. But we can also see how children cope with loneliness and which strategies they find to cope with a situation, look for help, and find relief. The following story exemplifies this pattern:

'You're a big girl, you can manage to stay home alone for two hours. We'll be back soon,' says Mum, in a hurry to make it to the parents' meeting. [...] *Mum said they'd all be back by 8pm, but time passes so slowly. At first, she keeps herself busy, but then she gets more and more restless. She has already put on her nightgown, just like Mum said. She keeps looking out the window over the balcony to see if anyone is coming.* [...] *She's a big girl after all, she tells herself, but she gets sadder and sadder. Feels alone and starts to cry.* [...] *she sits down in the hallway by the front door, hoping that this might help someone come faster.* [...] *Although she is at home, she doesn't feel safe or secure in the big flat, all alone. She has turned on all the lights, so the dark, green-painted hallway is no longer so scary.* [...] *She puts the key around her neck, opens the door to the apartment and sits down in front of the door near the staircases, sobbing. It makes her feel closer to the three lifts and therefore closer to her family* [...] *She doesn't care that she is sitting on the dirty doormat with her clean nightgown* [...] *She doesn't hear the lift opening. It is a neighbour coming home to his family who sees her crouching in front of the door, sobbing. He takes her over to his place and writes a note for her parents. The girl is ashamed and feels small, but at the same time is glad that she is no longer alone.* ('Big Girl' n.d., East Germany/GDR)

In this memory, the child is left alone at home because of an important appointment. The reason is very understandable to the child, she also does not want to disappoint her parents and wants to be as 'big' as she is told she is. However, these rational reasons for being alone do not help the child cope with the situation for long. Soon, a primal fear of being

alone in the world makes itself felt. The child in the memory tries to find ways to handle this situation.

To cope with her increasing fear, she constantly rethinks and optimises her strategies (turning on the lights, sitting in the hallway, putting on the key, waiting outside the door). In doing so, she does not completely surrender to her fear but faces it. And, while it is not her parents who find the girl in the end but rather the neighbour, the child gets help and relief through her actions.

We can also see how being trusted to be a 'big girl' can be overwhelming. The child tries to live up to this expectation but struggles. She is afraid and ashamed of being afraid at the same time. When she is rescued by the neighbour, she feels even more ashamed but also relieved. Even though the family was living in a 23-storey tower block, knowing the neighbours and helping each other was very common in the GDR. People were expected to form building communities (Hausgemeinschaften) that took responsibility for common areas and took turns mopping the stairs, for example, or taking care of the yard in front of the building. These state-mandated building communities often celebrated special occasions and held festivities together, but they could also feel like social pressure, as people would take notice of even the smallest changes in a family (Günther and Nestmann 2000).

The third pattern, of unsupervised times as loneliness, was rarely found in the archived memories. Again, this relative scarcity might be explained by the fact that those memory stories were collected from memory workshops focusing on different themes and moments in childhood. Nevertheless, there are some memories that speak of loneliness, fear, and feelings of abandonment, like children being scared of a storm and longing for their parents to come home, or the story about a child's anxiety after taking the wrong train during a subway journey. Again, loneliness arose in different ways and the children in the stories found different strategies to deal with these feelings. In the following memory story, the child finds a very creative way to deal with them:

[...] *Her favourite place to play was in the long hallway around or under a middle size table. The table was covered with a mostly yellow-red tablecloth with fringes. It had Slavic ornaments and floral prints. It was silky to touch. She remembers the smooth feeling as she glided her fingers following the threads. She loved to play under that table, especially with the fringes of the tablecloth.*

She remembers that she learned how to braid and kept practising until she ruined the fringes. It was lots of fun and never boring staying under the table. She remembers the inner layout of the table, the nuts and the screws. She used to open and fasten them. And she remembers talking to her imaginary friend under the table. As a child, she was alone a lot, as she was the youngest child in the family and the only girl, so she missed having friends. So, her 'friend' was a great company, she never felt alone. The friend did not seem to have a gender, emerged from the sentence 'Now we…'. She remembers daydreaming a lot under the table and sharing everything with this 'Bogus' of hers. ('Under the Table' n.d., unknown)

In this story, it is not her parents or another adult that the child is missing. She longs for friends and so invents one who appears every time she needs to share something with someone. Imaginary friends are quite common in early and middle childhood, fulfilling important developmental tasks for children, especially if real partnerships are not available (Gleason 2013). As the youngest child, the only girl in the family, and one who is often alone at home, the narrator uses this strategy to deal with feelings of loneliness. Here, too, we see the narrative of unsupervised times as a time for creativity arise again: the child invents an imaginary friend but also creates playful activities using what is already there—a table and a tablecloth.

Unfortunately, no geopolitical information is included in this story. Hints, such as the tablecloth with Slavic ornaments, could point to a socialist country of origin, but we cannot be sure about this, which makes it difficult to analyse this memory story in terms of wider societal structures. We will return to the challenges of working with other people's memory stories in our final conclusions.

Final Discussion and an Outlook

We would like to end with some preliminary conclusions. First, our analysis showed how the patterns of unsupervised times present in our memories of growing up in the GDR—unsupervised times as perceived freedom and contentment, as responsibility and as loneliness—can be found in different geopolitical spaces and times and are therefore useful analytical lenses. In general, we conclude that unsupervised time is mainly constructed as perceived freedom

and contentment in the analysed memory stories, although times of loneliness and responsibility are portrayed as well. The narratives we found across these three patterns show that during unsupervised times, important experiences for children's development take place: for example, being creative, imitating adults, breaking rules, and building communities with peers and siblings. We have also seen that the memories reveal many similarities across geopolitical boundaries, indicating that working with childhood memories can help bring more nuance to the often-stereotypical dichotomies between childhoods in 'the East' vs. 'the West'.

Furthermore, children in the analysed memory stories are constructed as active agents who have experiences, decide to act, are autonomous, and, often, organise themselves. And although this 'child as actor' perspective is nothing new for childhood studies in general, for a long time, it was not fully applied to research on children and childhood in formerly socialist countries. In those contexts, children were seen, instead, as passive receptors of education or even indoctrination through socialist educational institutions. Our analysis shows, though, that the concept of children's agency calls into question traditionalised, stereotypical images of Soviet/socialist childhoods as indoctrinated, institutionalised, and controlled. It makes visible the space for autonomous action within children's everyday lives in socialist societies.

Finally, we want to share some methodological considerations. We see collective memory work as a fertile reflexive method to access less-researched aspects of childhoods, in this case unsupervised times. Moreover, the Reconnect/Recollect memory archive provides an opportunity to access perspectives that are more typically excluded from prevailing tools of knowledge production, such as voices from post/socialist spaces.

While the archive makes accessible memories from a wide variety of geopolitical spaces, working with it is also fraught with challenges. In our own collective memory work, we have thought about our positionality then and now, and we have a great deal of knowledge about the specific situations but also the region. However, this contextual information is often missing when examining others' memories from the archive. This lack makes it more difficult to draw conclusions about societal structures and influences. But, for this reason, it is also easier to find

fairly generalised patterns and similarities, as we did. In working with the memory archive, we must take care not to, once again, construct a uniform picture of childhoods in which diversity across geographic spaces is lost. Subtle differences between memories and explanations of them are more difficult to identify, not only due to the lack of contextual information but also due to our own positionality as German researchers who cannot or can only with difficulty understand certain allusions and self-evident facts from other contexts that are part of the memories. Here, on the one hand, cooperation with the authors of the memories or with people from the respective regions could help. On the other hand, case studies and in-depth analyses of selected memories could be an approach to deal with these difficulties in further research.

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