

# Sprinkles and Ellie the Elephants: An Investigation of Girlhood Experience and Memory in the Late 1990s and Early 2000s

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to analyze cultural objects from my participant, Sarah's childhood experience between the late 1990s and early 2000s. The objects under investigation are two plush toy elephants, named Sprinkles and Ellie.

Sprinkles is a pink medium-sized plush toy that was given to Sarah at the age of two, around 2000 (figure 1). Sarah received Sprinkles when she was unfortunately admitted into hospitalization care. In addition, Ellie was given to Sarah around the age of four by her mother, while she was admitted into hospitalization care (figure 2).

I used collective memory work and interviews to explore five loose photographs of Sarah and the cultural objects.

Through collaborative ethnographic work and through the process of photo-elicitation, I was able to suggest that Sprinkles and Ellie remain as present-day keepsakes.

Key concepts: girlhood, representation, collective memory work, vulnerability, agency, transitional object, and keepsake.

## Thesis

Sarah's memory of her relationship to Sprinkles and Ellie reveals the tension she felt between vulnerability and agency. Therefore, they are transitional objects between the safety of home to away from home and remain as keepsakes. This reveals Sarah's lived experiences, memories, and representations of what girlhood meant for her in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

## Participant

Sarah is a 20-year old Canadian-Portuguese female who currently attends York University.

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Figure 1. GUND, Sprinkles the stuffed plush toy elephant.



Figure 2. GUND, Ellie the stuffed plush toy elephant.



Figure 3. Sarah standing in front of her elementary school holding Ellie.

## Methods and Approach

This research considered ethnographic methods of visual research, textual analysis method of photo-elicitation, and two open-ended interviews to investigate Sarah's girlhood experience and memory. Through collaborative memory work, five loose photographs of Sprinkles and Ellie, and Sarah photographed with the plush toys (figure 3), were examined.

Theoretical frameworks from current literature in the field of photo-elicitation, girlhood culture, and childhood culture fostered a rich analysis to investigate Sarah's adult memory.

Studying Sarah's photo collection "revealed diverse aspects of girlhood, including girlhood identities and relationships. It offered insights into the process of growing up and how changes in identity and belonging were expressed and experienced" (Tinkler, 269-270).

## Results

Sprinkles and Ellie remain as a present-day keepsake. They symbolize the tension Sarah felt between vulnerability and agency during her hospitalization care. They helped her "maintain self-esteem and confidence, and, thus, feel control of entire situations..." (Konstantinos, et al., 439). Sprinkles symbolized the moments when Sarah showed behaviours of strength in powerless moments in her childhood.

The plush toys were used as a "catalyst for ego growth as it provides maximum security in the phase of new and challenging internal and external realities" (Roig et al., 46).

## Conclusion

Sprinkles and Ellie reflected what girlhood meant in the late 1990s and early 2000s and continue to represent her girlhood experience. This research process furthered my understanding of the relationship between "representation", "young people", and "alterity". Alterity is understood as "the state of being other or different; diversity, and otherness" (Wexler, 1). The way Sarah represented herself and to others, enhanced my understanding of the ways young people represent themselves.