



Create, control and have territories or secret places: A comparative study of children's play territoriality in their daily outdoor environments between Beijing's urban villages and modern residential areas



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ABSTRACT

Outdoor activity spaces have very significant influences on children's growth and development. While being one of the most important spaces for children, their living environments have differentiated with the urbanization process in China. This study aims to examine the territorial selection, territorial psychology and territorial behavior of children 8–12 years old when playing outdoors from the perspective of human territoriality theory by comparing two groups of children living in urban villages and residential areas in Beijing respectively. The results show that the overall territoriality of children in residential areas is greater than that of children in urban villages. Children's territorial psychology and territorial behaviors are closely related to their cognition and spatial use. Whether the territories are dominated by groups or individuals, children in residential areas generally consider them to be play spaces, while children in urban villages tend to express feelings in their territories.

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1. Introduction

In the socialization process of children's growth, contact with the outdoor environment plays an important role in promoting their development (Little, 2010). Outdoor games and environments can help children to get familiar with the world around them (Eick, Tatarchuk, & Anderson, 2013). In addition, the daily outdoor environment is the most accessible play space for children and has a peculiar fascination for them. They usually have intense affection for such outdoor spaces as schools, streets and corners in residential areas. Since the process of rapid urbanization started in

China in the 1980s, the city space has been changed dramatically. There has occurred a phenomenon of differentiation in living environments, such as modern residential areas for urban residents and urban villages for migrant farm workers, which are particularly evident in Beijing. Growing up in these two differentiated living environments has a significant impact on children.

China's rapid urbanization is "characterized by large-scale rural–urban migration and radial expansion of urban built-up areas, and produces a new type of urban neighborhood, namely the 'urban village'" (Liu, He, Wu, & Webster, 2010, p. 135). There are several characteristics of this type of living environment: poor environmental sanitation, scant public services and infrastructure, poor residential quality, lack of maintenance for structural damage, disordered landscapes, dense arrangement, narrow interior roads, etc. Because of low rents, urban villages provide "affordable and accessible housing" for migrants (Hao, Geertman, Hooimeijer, & Sliuzas, 2013, p. 2177). Most of the low-income floating population was attracted to rent apartments there. However, the lack of

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urban household registration left them with no access to the welfare of urban citizens. Their children could only study in private schools established for migrant workers' children with relatively poor resource conditions, some of which are even regarded as illegal organizations.

Modern residential areas are distinct from the living environment of urban villages. With the increased income and perfection of the merchant house system, people have more demands and expectations for living conditions, quality of life and arrangements. Modern residential areas are also products of urbanization, which has occurred mostly since the 1990s. The overall environmental design, creation of residential landscape and leisure space, and public facilities for the entertainment of residents, have received increased attention. Residents living in these areas usually have stable income in cities and possess urban household registrations. Their children enjoy the welfare of urban citizens and receive education in the public schools supported by the government with better conditions as well as a higher quality of faculty.

1.1. Children's territories and secret places

“Territoriality understood as a spatial strategy includes the point where physical attributes and clear boundaries are intertwined with the people belonging to the place” (Farkisch, Ahmadi, & Che-Ani, 2015: 56). Regardless of the type of living condition in which children live, there always exist some special spaces for play. Considering New Delhi of India as a case study, Sudeshna Chatterjee (2005) examined the perspective of children's friendships with place and categorized child-friendly environments into six dimensions according to their own experiences, including creating and controlling territories and having a secret place. Wang et al. applied Chatterjee's research framework to investigate children's environmental friendliness in a hutong community in Beijing to analyze “spatially the preferences of these children and the characteristics and affordability of their spaces” (Wang, Liu, Pan, Zhao, & Zhang, 2012, p. 59). As in Chatterjee's research results, the authors found that children from 9 to 12 years old could create or control certain territories in the daily neighborhood play, and they declared that they have their own space and called it their territory, domain or secret place. The interview results showed that “secret places are distributed from home, courtyards, and fields inside or surrounding the community, as well as school playgrounds and virtual spaces, such as the Internet” (Wang et al., 2012, p. 66), indicating broad dispersion. The architect Christopher Alexander et al. (1977) also observed in similar places that children are very fond of hiding in places as much small as caves, playing house under tables, and they even pass through shell holes. He found that children are much more interested in kennels and henhouses than in large-scale building spaces. He advised that some shell holes be created for children in all play places. Therefore, Alexander et al. (1977) introduced the model of Children Caves, based on the perspective of buildings, in *A Pattern Language*. Canadian Educationalists Max Van Manen and Levering Bas (1996) explained this type of space from the perspective of educational phenomenology. They reported that children's growth is accompanied by secret behavior, and a secret place is one way in which children experience secrets.

Previous studies concerning the preferences of children and the characteristics of child-friendly spaces on different cases have shown that children create or control certain territories and declare that they have their own space, indicating a type of universal performance by children. To reveal the spatial selection of children and the reason children create these types of spaces, this paper attempts to explore children's choices about the forms of territorial space, children's territorial psychological motives toward space and

their specific territorial behaviors in the process of daily outdoor environment play from the perspective of the human territoriality theory of environmental psychology.

1.2. The features of children 8–12 years old

Regarding the choice of children's specific age levels, children 8–12 years old were selected as the study subjects. Using the stage of human development as the basis for classification, children 8–12 years old are in the middle of childhood (Blackwell, Lauricella, Conway, & Wartella, 2014), during which children have already begun school, and studying has become their primary activity, so it is also called the primary school period. Children in this period have the ability to think logically although this type of ability is mostly confined to specific thinking. Their concentration, memory and language expression skills are also improved. They are steadily growing in height and weight as well, with obvious growth in strength and sports skills. From the aspect of social interaction, children's individual consciousness is developed. School life weakens their sense of solipsism and causes their peers to become the centers of their lives. Different socialization occurs in groups of different genders. Groups of boys prefer bravado and competition, while groups of girls have good structural organization, begin to focus on the adult world and pay attention to developing personal friendship (Feldman, 2016).

In a word, children in the middle of childhood increase in their independence daily as well as in their strength activities and abilities. In addition, peer relationships begin to generate social behaviors, and children make rapid improvements in social contact, emotion and cognitive skills (Chatterjee, 2005). Their activity patterns mostly reflect the development of their self-concept and self-esteem (Feldman, 2014). They begin to participate in thoughtful and adventuresome activities. Regarding the choice of space, they start to understand the difference between personal and social spaces.

1.3. Territoriality

The concepts of territory and territoriality were first introduced to the study of animal behavior in the early 20th century (Nice, 1941). Through the observation of animals, researchers found that animals' behavior had features of occupying and protecting their own territories and driving away intruders. This behavior is of great significance for animals' foraging, courtship, mating, rearing and hiding. Since the mid-1960s, environmental psychology scholars started to realize that territoriality is also a human behavior. There are similarities between human beings and animals, referring to their behavior of intentionally or unintentionally protecting their own territories in cities and building spaces (Altman, 1975).

In this study, the classification method of Wang (2010) regarding the theory of territoriality was adopted and was divided into three dimensions: territorial space, territorial behavior and territorial psychology.

1.3.1. Territorial space

- (1) Classification of territories by the private and public degrees of space usage

Territories are classified according to the nature of physical space. The most influential classification was suggested by Altman (1975). Based on the different private and public degrees of space, territoriality was divided into three types: primary territory, secondary territory, and public territory. Primary territory is the basic and necessary spaces of personal daily life and is considered

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