



Discussing Nature, ‘Doing’ Nature: For an emancipatory approach to conceptualizing young people's access to outdoor green space

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ABSTRACT

Across the social sciences there is an extensive literature exploring the complex relationships between society and nature, increasingly concerned with, and critiquing, the notion of a unique relationship between children and green space. However, a nature/culture dichotomy remains central to socio-political discourse presenting a crisis of detachment. This nature/culture division can also be seen through practices surrounding children's access to ‘nature’. This paper explores the conflict between academic and societal approaches to the nature/culture divide through the perceptions and experiences of learning disabled young people, aged 11–16. The findings illustrate the importance of allowing (learning disabled) young people the opportunity for embodied engagement in ‘nature’ spaces. Through activity the young people developed nuanced and hybrid understandings of nature that contest widely held dichotomies of nature and culture. This conceptualisation of complexity and non-dichotomy in the relationship between culture and nature may underpin exploration of the specific facets of nature that provide wellbeing benefits, potentially increasing the accessibility of the recognised benefits of ‘nature’ interaction for those who experience challenges in reaching environments understood as ‘nature’-full. As such, this paper presents a call for academics to communicate hybrid geographies in a way that is accessible beyond the ivory tower.

1. Introduction

This paper explores what happens – the material places that emerge (Shillington, 2014) and the socio-spatial practices and structures that develop – through the romantic idealisation, and thereby the ‘othering’, of children and of nature (Taylor, 2013). Whilst many authors, including Taylor (2011, 2013), have argued for a conceptual blurring of artificial culture-nature boundaries (Castree, 2004; Malone, 2015; Kelley et al., 2012), the proliferation of the idea of the separation of nature and culture, and the naturalised link between children and nature, shape the socio-political formation of the relationship between society and the natural world (Head and Muir, 2006; Waitt et al., 2009). In other words, despite being strongly critiqued by academics, the notion of a clear ‘natural’ and ‘non-natural’ distinction plays a key role in the orders and structures of contemporary society, privileging particular spaces, products and practices. This paper seeks to explore the way that a dichotomous social interpretation of culture versus nature has informed learning disabled young people's experiences of outdoor green space.

This paper argues that the reified outcome of public understanding of nature as a distinct and bounded environment, is a detached and somewhat bleak approach to learning disabled children's relationship to

outdoor, green, and more-than-urban spaces. By contrast the post-dichotic approach prevalent across the social sciences may prioritize emotional and embodied engagement between children and outdoor spaces, lending itself to a more positive perception of the environment and the self. The discussion that follows will look to theory that explores the idea of nature and culture, or matter and discourse, as co-produced and acting upon one-another in a symbiotic manner – or the idea that nature and culture are inextricably linked and one can neither be materially or conceptually present without the other (Grosz, 2005; Barad, 2003). To practically manage and promote children's benefits from nature, the paper will turn to Gibson's theory of affordances, exploring the idea that what is good for children in nature might be identified as distinct from the broad and intangible concept of ‘nature’ itself. In so doing we might be able to consider the precise sorts of spaces and activities that will promote children's health and wellbeing, their social and intellectual intelligence and their emotional resiliency. The result is that we move conversation away from the value of nature itself, to the value of specific and tangible sorts of environments that might be reproduced or made accessible to learning disabled children.

As such, this paper presents the argument that an emancipatory approach to doing social geography may require geographers to translate the well-developed academic post-nature discourse for the

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general public in order to counter the dominant media discourse of a romanticized and innate connection between a white, able-bodied, middle class and heteronormative child and a distinct, yet diminishing 'nature' (Shillington and Murnaghan, 2016; Cairns, 2017).

2. Author's note

The young people who participated in this research were 11–16 year olds attending a specialist school for mild-moderately intellectually disabled 11–19 year olds in Greater Manchester. Therefore, the young people might be considered to self-identify as learning disabled. The term 'learning disabled' is used throughout this paper in response to the social model of disability which argues that people are disabled not as a logical outcome of impairment, but by society's inability to meet their needs (e.g. Oliver, 2004). In other words, the social model argues that specific impairments resulting in below-average cognitive functioning do not themselves render a person unable to contribute to, or engage with, society in an effective manner. Rather, the social model sees society's socio-political failure to be accessible and inclusive to people with impairments as the root cause of disability.

3. Review of literature

The dominant narrative in media representations of children's engagement with outdoor green space is one of a naive and innocent, heteronormative, able-bodied and neurotypical child, who has the potential to enjoy a positive, and symbiotic relationship with 'nature' (Moss, 2012). Typically this relationship is presented as an innate need for child/nature interaction that must be satisfied through unbounded, but productive and creative, engagement with wildlife and open space (Wilson, 2012; Bragg et al., 2013; Nilsen, 2008). Authors such as Louv (2009) present a crisis of detachment in which this fundamental relationship is under threat from competing interests, over-zealous risk management and a reduction in natural environments. Meanwhile newspapers run regular opinion pieces and light news reflecting and reinforcing public concerns over such issues as the reduction in time children spend outdoors, children's inability to identify wildlife, and diminished opportunities to climb trees (Monbiot, 2012; Meech, 2014; Bissett, 2016). The idea of children spending time in nature is part of an entrenched public imaginary of what it is to be a child, and closely tied to public understanding of childhood health and happiness (Taylor, 2011).

Alongside the news media, this public imaginary of an innate and positive relationship between children and nature is reflected through broader public policy and organizational rhetoric (see, for example the National Trust's '50 things to do before you're 11 ¾' campaign: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/50-things-to-do>). Quinn (2013: 719) describes a 'policy appropriation of nature' arguing that nature is increasingly central to policies in neoliberal western democracies (she gives examples of programmes in the US, Singapore and the UK and a timely addition might be the UK Government's 2018 25 Year Environment Plan), which can be associated with government concerns about developing young people as good citizens. This link between organized nature engagement, access to fresh air, and the development of citizenship (with contrasting definitions) has a long Anglo-American tradition. Organizations such as Boys' Brigade, the Baden-Powell Scouting and Guiding movements, Dr Barnardos and the Woodcraft Folk combined outdoor experiences, often drawing on the cultural appropriation of stereotyped Native American practices, with moral teachings and informal education of the young people in their care (Bigger and Webb, 2010; Soares, 2016; Kyle, 2014; Bannister, 2014; Mills, 2014).

This presumed connection between good childhood and nature reflects a long history of an assumed connection between the two, traceable to enlightenment thinkers (Taylor, 2011). The intensified public interest can also be theorized as a backlash to a perceived curtailment of children's independent mobility and play (Monbiot, 2012).

A discourse of children's reduced opportunities to play outdoors, with marked declines in opportunities for independent mobility and play over a generation, has also been prevalent in academia (Karsten, 2005; Adams and Savahl, 2015; Brussoni et al., 2015; Witten et al., 2013). This research is highly inter-disciplinary, with contributions from across the social sciences. Whilst much of this corpus of work is interested in children's independence, broadly, some contributions are particularly interested in focusing on a perceived diminishing independent access, and typically therefore, overall access, to green space and wildlife (Balmford et al., 2002; Skar and Krogh, 2009). This narrative feeds a public rhetoric of the 'denaturalization' of childhood (Taylor, 2013; McKee, 2005). This concept has in turn led to the development of the term 'nature-deficit disorder' (Louv, 2009), an idea that has gained traction with both campaigners and medical professionals (Driessnack, 2009).

In many of these accounts nature is considered material; landscape, environment or object that can be delineated and designated (Russell et al., 2013; Honold et al., 2016). Indeed, a dominant school of thought in environmental psychology sees 'connectedness to nature' as a relationship that can be quantified (Mayer and McPherson Frantz, 2004; Barton et al., 2016). Gillon (2014) describes the way that 'nature' becomes a label ascribed to a landscape for the purposes of consumption or protection, with the designation of rural areas being used as a tool for conservation. In another vast swathe of literature, predominantly emanating from environmental psychology, landscape studies and geography, nature is a term explored in order to interrogate the health and wellbeing benefits of these landscapes to people (Shanahan et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2013). In qualitative research, notions of therapeutic landscapes, and salutogenic environments (Gesler, 1992; Beute and Kort, 2014; Lea, 2008), concern the ability of the natural environment to provide space that promotes human wellbeing. In the media, environmental science, popular non-fiction and organisational rhetoric described above, 'nature' is presented as a tangible and knowable place of innate and unique character. These literatures present 'nature' as an environment that is universally and timelessly knowable, following a Romantic conceptualization of nature as counter to culture, of wild and unmanaged spaces that provide a (positive) contrast to urban and developed places (Oerleman, 2004).

These literatures present a clear case for the need to conserve places deemed 'natural' in order that they can be accessed by the public, and particularly children, who will experience a range of benefits from connecting with these spaces. These benefits primarily concern psychological relaxation and restoration (Hertzog and Strevey, 2008), but authors have also identified a wide range of other benefits that include wellness, increased physical activity, cognitive benefits and social benefits (Faber Taylor and Kuo, 2006; Frumkin, 2001). Childhood experiences of nature have particularly been linked with an ongoing desire to seek out experiences of nature in adulthood (Ward Thompson et al., 2007; Snell et al., 2016; Ewert et al., 2005). Meanwhile experience of nature has been demonstrated to be closely linked to an emotional response to, or conceptualised relationship with, natural spaces (Asah et al., 2017). As such, those who have frequent and ongoing contact with natural spaces are shown to be more committed to environmental stewardship, and associated pro-environmental behaviours, than those with limited contact (Ward Thompson et al., 2008; Larson et al., 2017).

These papers present a clear justification for facilitating access to nature, especially for children. However, the presentation of natural landscapes in juxtaposition to manmade ones, as something 'other' to socio-cultural or economic space presents a challenge for those unwilling or unable to access wild and untamed spaces (Kong et al., 1999; Milligan and Bingley, 2007). An essentialist approach to nature, which sees natural spaces as having particular and innate characteristics, also risks being co-conceived with a set of ideas about what, and potentially who, belongs in these spaces - as such, the concept of nature can be used to exclude (Eden, 2001; Burns et al., 2013; Travlou, 2006). For example

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