FROM CHILDHOOD TO YOUTH: CHILDREN'S OWN PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL-SPATIAL TRANSITIONS

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Abstract

This article argues that understanding of life-stage transitions in childhood should include attention to changes identified by children and young people themselves. This also provides insights into the way in which children's lives involve an interaction between their current everyday concerns and activities on the one hand and their awareness of change and age differences on the other hand. Using qualitative data from children age 10-14 gathered in two studies, attention is drawn to aspects they highlighted about how their engagement with the world outside home and school altered as they made the journey through middle childhood into youth.

Introduction

Much academic and policy attention has focused on the transition *out of* youth into adulthood (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; MacDonald & Marsh, 2005), but comparatively little on the transition *into* youth from middle childhood. This reflects a broader pattern of interest whereby the phases of childhood that invoke most research and publications have been the early years (seen as critical foundations for the future) and adolescence or youth (often portrayed as a particularly troubling and troublesome stage of life). In developmental psychology the phase of middle childhood has been less differentiated than the early or teen years, with a focus on cognitive development and relationships within the family and at school (Bee, 1994).

Youth transitions have also largely been conceptualised in terms of dimensions produced by adults. The social studies of childhood has, by contrast, urged that greater attention and credence be given to understanding children's own perspectives on their everyday lives (Christensen & James, 2000; Hallett & Prout, 2003; Valentine & Holloway, 2000). At the same time, the whole idea of stages and progression has been questioned, as being too universalised, deterministic and future-oriented, devaluing children's agency and their current concerns (James & Prout, 1998; James & James, 2004). It has been argued that children are devalued when viewed largely as future adults (becoming) rather than as individuals whose current capacities, priorities and activities are important (being). This is a useful corrective to developmental frameworks, but presents a false dichotomy. Children and young people are both *being* individuals with current lives, but they are also *becoming older* and moving towards adulthood (Uprichard, 2008). Within that context, it is important to understand how children themselves see age differences and changes affecting their lives. This should entail not just 'macro-becoming' (the childhood-adulthood transition) but also 'micro-becoming' (various transitions during childhood).

This article will offer insights from children making the transition from middle childhood into the teen years. This period involves moving into 'adolescence' or 'youth', with the choice of term depending on the professional or theoretical background. To fit with varied ways of describing individuals of these age, both the terms 'children' and 'young people' will be used to depict them in this article.

The research

The paper is based on two studies carried out in a range of urban and rural environments in the West of Scotland. The first study was intended to explore how parents influenced children's resilience in disadvantaged areas (Seaman, Turner, Hill, Walker & Stafford, 2006; Turner, Hill, Walker & Stafford, 2006; Hill, Turner, Stafford & Walker, 2006). Sixty children, of whom 39 (58%) were girls, participated in individual interviews. Another 16 children participated in discussion groups involving five or six children per group. Eighty-four parents were also interviewed and 17 took part in group discussions. The study focused on perceptions of risk in the local areas and strategies for keeping safe and developing the children's well-being.

The second study involved 53 children (37 females; 16 males) and investigated the impact of poverty on the use of services children identified as most relevant to them, notably health, leisure and retail (Wager, Bailey, Day, Hamilton, Hill & King, ';2007). The research examined children's ideas about what constituted a service and their accounts of how, when and why they chose to use certain facilities and not others. For the sake of brevity, the two studies will be referred to as the Resilience Study and the Services Study respectively and will not be referenced separately each time.

Each of the two pieces of research obtained qualitative data from both group discussions and individual interviews with children aged 10 to 14 years, with a focus on their views and use of the environment beyond their home and school. Each group discussion included children of similar ages (10-11 years or 13-14 years) in order to highlight differences in age and experience. The decision to sample children at different points on the transition from childhood to adolescence was taken since this is a period when children in economically 'advanced' societies typically start spending more time away from their homes and without adult company, supervision and protection (Borland, Laybourn, Hill & Brown,1998; Collings, Harris & Susman, 1995). Although the majority of children in the studies were from low-income households, the Services Study included a comparison sample from more affluent households.

The findings of both studies were congruent despite their different foci. Certain key features of growing older at this life phase (micro-becomings) emerged from what the young people said in terms of how they managed their lives outside the home and away from school:

- Gradually increasing but still restricted freedom in decision-making
- Corresponding expansion of movement and activity apart from adults
- Institutional age-related opportunities and barriers
- Perceptions of age suitability

Each of these is now considered in turn and the complex processes involved will be illustrated. We then consider how social differentiation and poverty impacted on the transition to adolescence.

Parental regulation and rules – from imposition to negotiation

It has been suggested that, partly as a consequence of parental fears, children have 'experienced progressive removal from the streets and public spaces', as parents seek to ensure that children spend their time in organised and/or supervised activities (Prout, 2005, p.33). The data from both parents and children in our Resilience Study showed that such regulation did occur. In many households, as children engaged in activities separately from their parents this often took the form of attending formalised clubs and lessons or going to supervised leisure and shopping centres. Here they and their parents felt they were safe, as

well as enjoying themselves, developing talents, making important social contacts and/or learning vital skills.

One of the means by which parents sought to manage perceived risk to their children as they increasingly spent time beyond direct supervision was by means of rules. These typically covered an interaction between *time* and *place*. In other words, certain locations or routes were forbidden either altogether or at certain times, while coming home was expected to occur by an agreed time. The rules took account of whether the child was alone or accompanied.

Parents in the Resilience Study varied greatly in the nature, fixedness and sanctions of their rules, but hardly any expected total conformity and nearly all expected there to be some degree of negotiation, especially as children grew older. This fits with a trend in much of Western Europe in the 1990s from traditional command forms of parent-child relations to negotiating households (Borland et al., 1998; Du Bois-Reymond, 1995). A progression was evident in the remarks of several children in the Services Study, who described how they began asking to be allowed to do certain things at about age 8 or 9 years, but of having to wait a year or two before their parents agreed.

Nearly all the children in our studies said they accepted and indeed often valued rules as being there to protect them. Although some of the older respondents commented that they resented parental monitoring, many actively requested parental surveillance or availability as a means of keeping safe. Many said they were reassured to know they could call a parent on their mobile phones, either to be collected or to help out with possible difficulties. Thus, mobile phones were a key source of security, providing a form of pseudo-company when passing through unfamiliar or 'dangerous' territory, as well as a means of obtaining help if needed. This is an example of how innovative technologies are shaping and shaped by the cultures and spaces of children's everyday lives (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 2001). As noted by Aitken, (2001) and Kerns and Richardson (2005), mobile phones constituted a new kind of 'transitional object', combining the virtues of a comfort blanket with the practical means of maintaining communication with a secure base while exploring or traversing risky spaces. On the other hand, mobile phones are also open to manipulation by children (e.g. switching off so a parent cannot make contact).

With increased age, children expressed greater expectations of being able to negotiate flexibility with regard to rules or exceptions in implementation. For instance, younger children in the Resilience Study often reported being expected to be home before it was dark, whereas older children described less standard formulations. In the Services Study, parental perceptions of friends formed a key element of this negotiation:

> *My parents trust my friends; my mum spoke with some of them on the phone, so she knows I'm okay with them.*

Some 13-14-year-olds were not averse to avoiding or subverting application of the rules at least occasionally, for example, not letting parents know where they were or, when grounded at home, making a nuisance so that parents were disinclined to use this as a sanction.

Negotiating the world outside the home with evolving agency

Associated with increasing age, most children in both studies spent considerable amounts of time apart from adults, particularly to pursue their interests in recreation and shopping. This often entailed spending time in functionally specific locations, such as shopping centres, leisure centres and clubs. Also important was the use of multi-purpose public spaces. As Matthews, Limb and Taylor (2000) found, 'the street' (defined to include a range of urban

spaces including pavements, shopping centres and alleyways) was an important location for urban children to spend time when away from home and school. Parks too were popular with some, though for others lack of interesting things to do or the attitudes of older or adult users discouraged use. Green spaces and woods, where accessible, were also common sites for exploration and spending leisure time, normally with peers. Often use of such unregulated spaces was a positive choice, though some children did highlight the absence of alternatives.

Respondents in the Services Study described their growing independence from their parents over time, highlighting milestones that had been reached or were aspired to. For example walking to and from school without a parent tended to occur around eight or nine years of age, while being allowed to go into a town centre with friends without parental supervision frequently began around the transition from primary to secondary school at eleven or twelve years.

Typically, children's first experiences beyond the immediate neighbourhood without parents or other adults tended to occur first with siblings, cousins or friends, with solo journeying coming later. This represented not only a shift from parent to peer-accompanied travel, but also entailed modifications in the patterns or frequency of activities too. In part, choices about what to do became more peer-influenced, while freedom from reliance on parental availability could increase the scope for some ventures. Hence sometimes children went shopping more frequently with friends than they had previously done with parents, or started regular trips to the cinema with friends at weekends. Conversely, family outings and visits to places preferred by parents declined. Nevertheless access to formal services often remained contingent on parental knowledge and support. This applied both to gaining initial entry (eg. to inform the child about available facilities, assist with application processes) and to supporting attendance (eg. meeting the cost, providing transport, affording safe passage). One 10-year-old boy said

> *'A lot of big people go there, so my Mum or my Dad comes with me'.*

Portrayal of peers' growing influences on individuals' selection of places to go revealed the impact to be double-edged. Friends stimulated interest and provided encouragement, confidence, company and security for using a wide range of informal and formal spaces. Friends and their families could also open up avenues to places that could not otherwise be accessed or afforded. This was especially so for children in low-income households, some of whom only went on distant trips when taken by a friend's family. Yet a number of young people, especially in the 13-14-year-old age group, described being confined to certain places, because they thought friends were unwilling to go elsewhere, while doing so alone risked the loss of a valued friendship group. Indeed, some young people of that age thought that negative attitudes by friends were the key barrier preventing young people from using certain local services. Their accounts suggested a tendency to avoid confrontations or discomfort by opting out of participating in a club or leisure centre because a group identified as 'other' were present :

> *It is not really much fun being around somewhere if they just shout abuse at you and throw stuff.*

Also, especially in urban areas, certain neighbourhoods close to home were seen as risky to enter, usually on account of a somewhat older age-group present there who were seen as threatening.

> *It's like teenagers, they are pure jumping and they hit him on the head.*(Boy aged 12)

> *And they are like 18, 19, 17 years old. And I am afraid of them cause I am feart that they are going to hit me.* (Girl aged 14)

Territories were avoided as they were dominated by gangs. Children showed an acute awareness of the interaction between time and place in affecting the safety or danger of particular locations. For instance, one boy said he avoided a shopping centre at certain times:

> *Saturday nights are the worst…because (other young people) start shouting abuse at you.*

> *And then chase you, try to hurt you...*

Whereas children's leisure and consumer activities altered significantly with age, use of specialist services particularly health showed greater continuity and in most instances prolonged passivity. The majority of children in the Services Study at both 10/11-years-of-age and 13/14-years-of-age described how mothers took on the role of securing health-related appointments, and nearly all accompanied children on journeys to health services as noted also by Brannen, Dodd, Oakley and Story (1994) and Mayall (1996). All the younger children reported that consultations took place in the presence of a parent, with the dominant dialogue often being between the adults. This remained true for the majority of older children, who often continued to find parental presence reassuring, but some did report seeing health professionals alone or contributing significantly to the discussion.

The interface between physical-sexual development and a growing wish for social-spatial autonomy was apparent among some 13/14 year olds who expressed a wish for access to confidential health services, especially in relation to sexual health concerns. Indeed, some young people of this age group, especially girls, highlighted the importance of alternative routes to professionals who 'would not tell your parents'. A different impact of puberty was evident in fears of sexual assault, reported only by some older children, mainly females. During one focus group, 14-year-old girls spoke about their worries of being attacked, raped and conceiving.

Institutional age-related opportunities and barriers

Just as the youth transitions to adulthood are marked by legal and institutional age-related milestones with regard to entitlement and membership (for voting, driving etc.), so children on the threshold of youth encounter age-related distinctions. This is perhaps most apparent in relation to school, where children's adaptations have been much studied, especially when making the transition from primary to secondary school (Galton, 2000; Boyd, 2005; Graham & Hill, 2003; Pratt & George, 2005). Here we describe certain other institutional age-related transitions that the children in our studies highlighted. As with change of school, this often represented abrupt age-thresholds rather than gradual alterations.

Outside school, precise age-related thresholds apply to a range of services and transport. One girl aged 11 years in the Resilience Study referred to exclusion from a facility intended for younger children:

> *The small park's for three to ten year olds.   So if we want to go over, we are not allowed in that park.*

Many of the children in the Services Study questioned the inflexibility of certain membership ages. Some felt they were old enough to attend leisure activities they were formally excluded from as too young. For instance one group said they could not attend a leisure centre gym without an adult until they were 16, while elsewhere a gym specifically for under-16-year-olds was available.

Passing a certain birthday could also lead to increased costs, which might inhibit travel or activities. In particular, children living in low income households explained that they were or

would soon be no longer eligible for cut-price public transport or discounted entry to a well-liked facility, so that their range of movement and involvement became more circumscribed or sporadic in certain respects. On the other hand, young people in Scotland from age 11 years onwards become eligible for a Young Scot card, which entitles the bearer to discounts on a range of services in the local authority area where s/he resides. Most children who mentioned the Young Scot card indicated that it enabled them to obtain cheap access to selected shops, leisure centres or cinemas occasionally, though a few described more frequent usage. However in one urban area the card could not be used to reduce costs of using the nearest leisure centre, as it was located in a different local government authority.

Perceptions of age suitability

As well as formal distinctions made on the basis of precise age thresholds or limits, looser and more informal age barriers emerged from peer-referenced definitions of services' age suitability. Thus children frequently reported withdrawing from attending a service that they did not perceive met the needs of their age group, even if it was meant to be aimed at them. For instance a number of 13 and 14 year olds - particularly girls - thought that local youth club provision was more suited to a younger age group. As one young person said:

> *Well, there are not a lot of folk my age go there now, so it is just like the younger ones and I don't really know them.*

Thus children's views on the suitability of places and activities were often sharply age-related, resulting in a self imposed exclusion. Similarly, children's comments indicated that spaces like parks often found it hard to accommodate the expressed needs of children at different ages. Again, some 13/14-year-olds described how local park facilities tended to be designed for younger children rather than themselves, but they were interested in using these places to meet friends and spend time. Comments indicated that their transition to youth interests was well under way. One comment was:

> *There is nothing to do for young people of my age, it's all for children, the swings and the slides. They should put things for us, as well.*

It was also observed that most health centres and surgeries had a waiting area with toys and books suited to young children, but nothing for older children, such as a computer. Although some children from about 12 years of age onwards increasingly dissociated themselves from the interests of younger children and spaces used by them, others altered their use of space to accommodate responsibilities towards younger children, particularly siblings. For instance some young people still went to facilities such as play parks but now they were accompanying and chaperoning young children rather than using them for their own enjoyment.

Social differentiation and spatial in/exclusion

The affordability of activities affected the places all children could go to, with indirect costs for travel, suitable clothes and equipment or refreshments often being as significant as entrance and membership fees. However the impact was greater on less affluent children. This meant that the widening of social activities and geographical range experienced by many children as they grew older was much less evident in the poorest households. Children living in low-income households often said they were not able to join regular organised activities with their friends such as dance classes. Instead they tended to spend more time in less supervised ways and locales. This could provide them with greater freedom, but many complained of boredom and exclusion from desired activities. Also the potential for developing skills and social capital was denied them as noted by Seaman (2004). Many

children, but particularly those living in poverty, were more likely to frequent places where recreation, learning or social contacts could be pursued free of charge (e.g. swimming pools that did not charge children; libraries with free internet access). The last example, libraries and the Internet, provide examples of children making links with the macro-environment and indeed global spaces outside their local experience.

Patterns of inequality in household finances were superimposed on an age progression in which children gained both more autonomy in expenditure of their (increased) pocket money and tended to have more influence on parents' collective purchasing. Many children began engagement in part-time work, sometimes within their social network. This was more common in low income households. Between 10 and 14 years of age the responsibility for making spending decisions related to shopping, travel and leisure activities for the child slowly shifted from parents to young people. Whereas 10 year olds in low-income households tended to emphasise their parent's role in decision-making with comments such as *'… my Mum won't let me go to the dancing because it's too dear',* older children more often spoke of making choices themselves related to affordability. One young women living in a deprived inner city estate said she never went to bookshops, but used the library and bought books from charity shops. The latter had the advantage of cheapness, but also an outlet for altruism: *'you help people'.*

Implications for understanding the transitions from childhood to youth

This article has focused on children's engagement with the wider world rather than their psychological development, drawing on children's own accounts about how they negotiate their local environment and make choices about activities and use of space. Geographical and sociological approaches to *childhood* have in recent years struggled to find satisfactory ways of dealing with changes in children, as they grow older. Quite rightly, rigid and universalised concepts of stage have been rejected, but this has often meant that any notion of progression has been ignored or criticised for reifying development and portraying children en route to adulthood, rather than valuing their present experiences (becoming rather than being) (James & James, 2004).

This contrasts with the *youth* transitions literature, which has managed to reconcile, sometimes contentiously, age-related changes with both individual agency and social patterning (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006). Youth transitions have mainly been examined through the analysis of the duration, subjective experiencing and interaction of different dimensions or ecological contexts, such as education, family relations, peer bonds, leisure and employment (MacDonald & Marsh 2005). These dimensions can also be applied to childhood, although with differing salience. For instance education in school is a dominant arena during childhood, whereas for most children in Western Europe work is secondary.

In this paper, we have suggested that it is important when considering phases and transitions to take account of children's own views about the salience and meaning of the different contexts in which they lead their daily lives and about how these relate to age differences. Our studies have not covered all aspects of the transition from middle childhood to the teen years, but concentrated on children's relationships and activities outside the home, mainly in their local neighbourhoods and at school. They recognised, however, the crucial mediating role of parents, siblings and household resources in children's management of the world beyond the home. We have not focused on physical and intellectual changes within the child, but the conceptions held by children, parents and other adults about evolving capacity and age-appropriateness have been central to understanding the scope and constraints experienced by children as they act increasingly independently of adults. A full account of the transition from childhood to youth needs to encompass the complex interaction among all these dimensions,

drawing on children's own perspectives, though not confined to these since children may not be able to articulate all the processes and influences involved.

The studies discussed have taken place in particular locations within one developed country, so we do not presume that the conclusions may be generalised to other cultures and socio-economic circumstances. Within a globalising world, it remains clear that children's lives remain deeply influenced by national, ethnic and local values and practices (Ansell, 2004). Nevertheless the processes are likely to resonate with those that occur elsewhere, especially where the settings are more similar. Within the specific context studied, there were also indications of the importance of the particular time (the cohort effects mentioned by Elder, Modell & Parke, 1993) notably around the now extended use of mobile phones for managing communication and travel.

The evidence from the two studies of children's perceptions of risk and resilience and of service use illustrated how the transition from childhood to youth was the product of multiple, interacting dimensions. Nearly all the children were experiencing a growth in the scale and diversity of the places they accessed. However usage of spaces outside home and school was affected by the resources and social capital available within those two key universal sites for the children. Dialogue with parents was widely seen as the usual and preferred means of negotiating expanded time and space horizons, though examples of imposition, resistance and subversion were also revealed. Many features of the local environment were influential, particularly were the size and quality of informal spaces in the locality where children lived, the proximity and nature of local services and access to transport. Perceptions of territorially and time based safety and notions of age-appropriateness figured prominently in children's accounts of their selective use of public spaces.

The gradual expansion of horizons and locales experienced by children in many respects was accompanied by more abrupt institutionally determined transitions. The most dramatic and near universal of these was the transfer to a larger, usually more distant school at around the age of 11 years. Children also reported other age thresholds affecting their choices. These included formal membership criteria based on age, the impact of age on travel costs and more subtle but significant ideas about the appropriateness of facilities and the desirability or not of mixed age usage of the same provision, such as parks and clubs.

A vital component in negotiating the transition to youth comprised perceptions of temporal variations in landscapes of risk, which directly affected children's 'being' in the world. The significance of these will doubtless differ in other locations from those studied, with varying types of hazard being prominent. In the British context, the chief threats of increasing prominence as children grew older were other people, particularly groups a little older than themselves seen as threatening. At the same time, peers and friends were a major source of security and intelligence about risks.

A different kind of risk relates to children's 'becoming': namely life chances and the likelihood of positive outcomes as regards such matters as work, health and relationships later in life. Our studies showed that the great majority of parents, including many in disadvantaged circumstances, were seeking to enable their children to combine amusement with learning that would enhance their future prospects in an increasingly competitive world (Seaman et al., 2006). Children living in poor urban neighbourhoods were at multiple risk in this sense, especially when household income was low. Services were often restricted in range; transport expensive; direct and indirect costs of activities prohibitive; private informal space limited and public informal space often insecure. Access to more transformative experiences outside school was frequently limited or nil (Wager, Bailey, Day, Hamilton, Hill & King, 2007). Both their present and their future were severely constrained. Thus, alongside a generally positive pattern of growing agency and diversity in the transitions to youth for the

majority, was evident restricted opportunities for a minority, which foreshadows the later moves into adulthood.

It may be concluded that ideas about the transition from childhood to youth need to recognise the interaction among changes in different domains of children's lives; the negotiation of autonomy and risk among children, parents, other key adults and peers; the interplay of gradual and graduated exercise of children's and parental agency on the one hand and institutionally determined age barriers and thresholds on the other. Despite the presence of many individualising processes in Western societies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Mythen, 2004), social patterning and exclusion according to income, gender, location, ethnicity and other factors continue to be important. We hope that this article will stimulate further investigations of how children's own perspectives of transition are constructed within opportunities and constraints affected by differing geographical, political and social circumstances. This will ideally include longitudinal accounts.

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