

'Kindheit und Raum' versus 'Children's Geographies'

Overview about two comparable yet distinct discussion threads

Introduction

Children's interactions with the environment and their exploration and appropriation of the urban space are of interest in an academic debate that has evolved in both Germany and the UK. The comparison below illustrates both discussion threads and focuses respectively on the seven and eight most prominent publications in each country. Prominence is measured via the number of citations in Google Scholar. Whilst each discussion thread is homogenous (the same early authors are cited by nearly all successors), the very few cross-references between the two lines of discussion (shown with grey arrows) illustrate that they do not recognize each other.

Milestone publications in the German academic debate

Social area analysis (*Sozialraumanalyse*)

- is prominent in social work especially and in a practice-orientated context and has triggered a huge amount of literature
- is focused on children (or adults) in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods and not so much on spatial exploration
- in these small units, it is assumed that people and organised groups of people have the chance to network
- it is also assumed that the small-scale focus on specific urban areas facilitates the active participation of the affected individuals
- the capacity of (young) people to appropriate and/or repossess the urban public space is a key concept; the approach is thus designed to mobilise the resources available to the people concerned
- the approach is not specifically designed for research on children, but a large part of the literature is focused on the education sector and on youth work



Christian Reutlinger u.a.:
Basic Concepts of Spatial Research
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 387



Fabian Kessel und Christian Reutlinger:
Handbook Social Area
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 189



Ulrich Deinert:
Socio-Spatial Youth Work
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 271

The re-emerging debate of the 1980s and 1990s

- first major shift from predominant model of concentric circles to describing how children appropriate space
- childhood is described as being more under the pedagogic influence/surveillance than ever
- compared to the pre-war period, childhood is now predominantly taking place at (pedagogic) institutions specifically created for children
- an intensive and autonomous engagement with the urban space is inhibited and therefore the urban environment loses its pedagogic significance
- the theses are mostly formulated without taking social class into account, but in fact the phenomena described are highly dependent on preconditions only met in the middle class or higher social strata
- the children's perspective is not taken into account
- the domestication of children is also a phenomenon of increasing prosperity, i.e. children do now have a room of their own (compared to the pre-war period Martha Muchow describes)



Helga Zeiher and Hartmut J. Zeiher:
Children's Islands in Space and Time
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 497



Jürgen Zinnecker:
From Street Child to the Domesticated Child
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 186



Helga Zeiher:
The Many Spaces of Children
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 345

The most frequently cited early publication

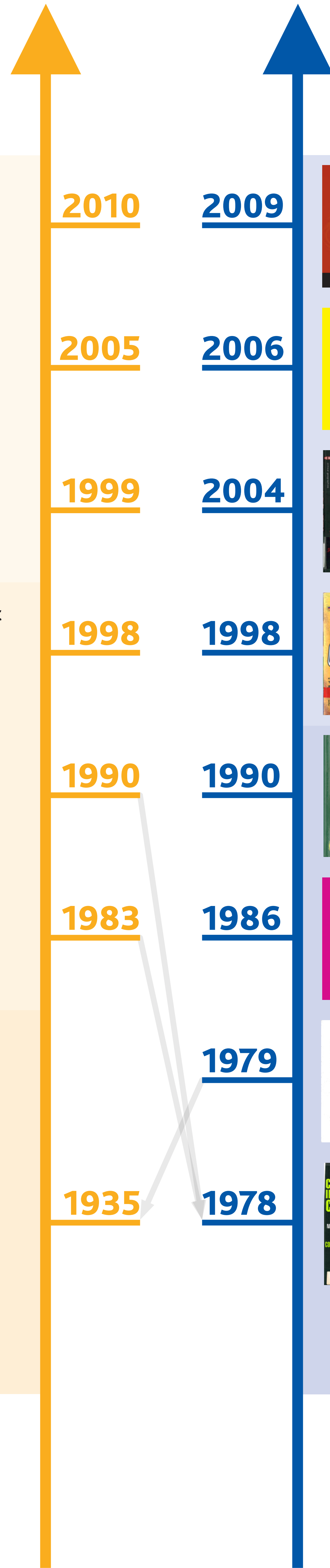
- is primarily interested in children's play: play is the natural way for children to cope with their environment
- has a multiple perspective on space: space is not exclusively seen as geographic territory
- does not exclusively look at (institutionalised) places where children are under the influence of pedagogic personnel
- is interested in taking the children's perspective into account
- shows an unbiased and 'wertneutral' (value-free) interest in how children interact with their environment
- has great confidence in children's abilities to cope with the urban environment
- adopts the concept of the 'concentric circles' from Ernest Burgess as a method for understanding children's appropriation of the urban space
- gives a fascinating account of how children appropriate places where they are not officially allowed to be (the chapter about Karstadt Warenhaus)



Martha Muchow:
The Life Space of the Urban Child
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 396

German debate

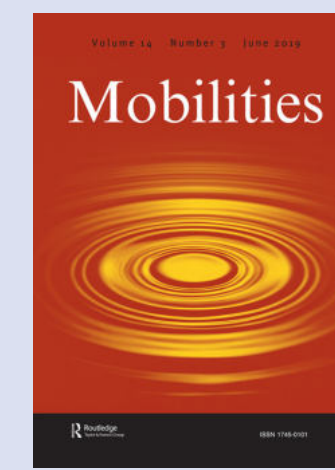
The German discourse is clearly dominated by a diagnosis of decline or even deterioration: after the pioneering work of Martha Muchow, most researchers observe a degeneration of children's independent mobility. Socialisation on the streets, taken for granted until about the 1950s or 1960s, is now limited due to parents' concerns. Children are institutionalised, and their mobility is becoming more and more dependent on the mobility of adults. There is a general complaint that the natural and urban environment is losing its pedagogic significance for children. This diagnosis has triggered a nearly universal (and uniform) call for more rough and open space for children in their neighbourhoods.



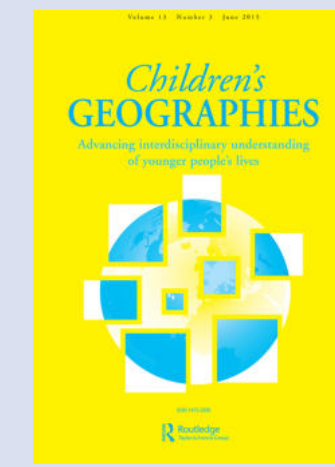
British debate

In Britain, the discourse about children's geographies cannot easily be reduced to one dominator as it is the multiplicity itself that distinguishes it. However, a striking feature of the literature is that it can resist describing a 'universal' modern childhood. Instead, children's experience of place is always differentiated by gender, relative age, ethnicity, social class, etc. Another common topic is that children must be seen as 'human beings' – social agents in their own right – and not as mere 'human becomings' only defined by socialisation. The third broadly shared view in the later British discourse is that the idea and ideal of 'childhood' is always a social construct and an artefact of adult in(ter)vention.

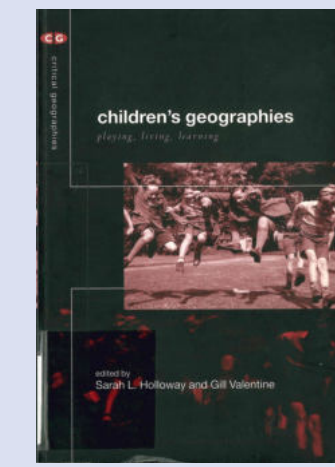
Milestone publications in the UK academic debate



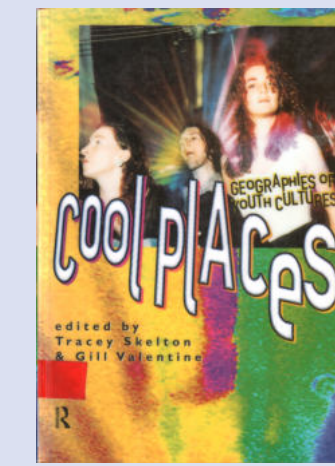
John Barker, Peter Kraftl, John Horton and Faith Tucker:
The Road Less Travelled
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 138



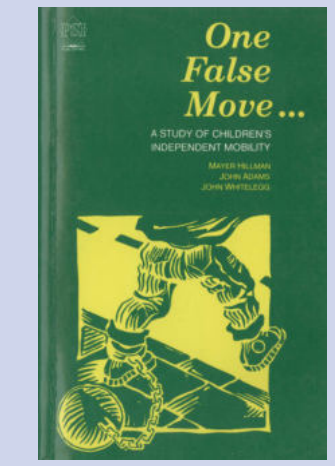
John Horton and Peter Kraftl:
What Else?
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 264



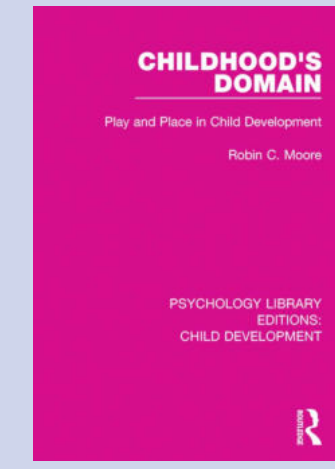
Sarah L. Holloway and Gill Valentine:
Children's Geographies
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 920



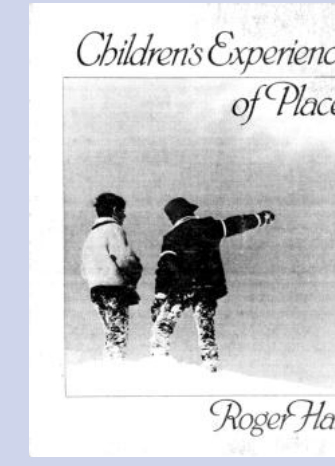
Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine:
Cool Places
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 921



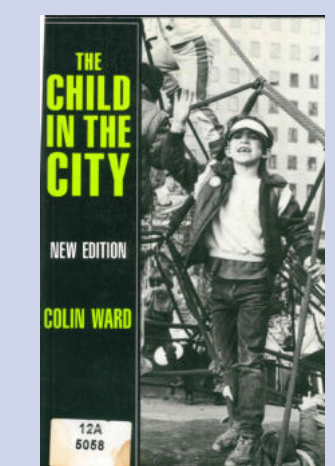
Mayer Hillman, John Adams and John Whitelegg:
One False Move
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 1031



Robin C. Moore:
Childhood's Domain
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 840



Roger Hart:
Children's Experience of Place
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 1545



Colin Ward:
The Child in the City
Number of Google Scholar: cited by 840

The emerging field of critical geographies of childhood at the end of the 1990s

- according to Barker et al., new social science approaches make three key assumptions about the study of children: there is no such thing as a 'universal' child; children should be understood as social agents in their own right (agency); and childhood is a social construction
- apart from those three key assumptions, the authors call for a broader analysis of adult-child power relationships (and surveillance) regarding children's independent mobility
- but above all one must think of age and mobility as co-productive of one another and not simply see age as a 'structuring' category that controls children's (im)mobilities
- John Horton and Peter Kraftl call to move beyond the exclusively cognitive and discursive realm of mainstream academic research, i.e. to find out more about currently ignored aspects in children's geographies
- instead they want to establish non-representational children's geographies, looking at bodies, affects, everyday practices and routines, materials, ongoingness, etc.
- children are seen as active beings whose agency is important in the creation of their everyday lives; at the same time, childhood is also a structural feature, beyond the control of the individual child
- attention is given to children themselves (as human beings) rather than only looking at the forces of socialisation (human becomings)
- leave behind essentialist assumptions about children having a naturally 'good' or 'bad' identity and see childhood as socially constructed, varying between social groups, societies and historical periods
- understand connections between global and local processes
- general aim is to establish a cultural and critical geography, i.e. to put the geography of youth cultures (which have been neglected so far) on the geographic research agenda
- give marginalised groups (such as children) a voice by conducting empirical research in cooperation with them and by recognising them as competent agents in their own lives
- really document the self-images of youth groups or cultures and resist the temptation to instantly interpret them as 'oppositional' or 'resistant'

Modern classics engaged in the spatial experience of children

- starting point of the research was the fact that child fatalities from road accidents in the UK have declined, while at the same time the volume of traffic has nearly doubled
- surveys were conducted in the UK and Germany and registered a dramatic decline in children's independent mobility (without adult supervision)
- evidence is presented that shows that parents restricted their children's independent mobility because of their fear of the dangers of traffic
- the authors argue that reduced rates of child road accidents are a consequence of children being withdrawn from exposure to increased danger (and not because roads have become safer)
- general aim of the study is to serve as a basis for local community environmental planning
- the idea is to optimise children's developmental potential by identifying urban settings which offer optimal positive stimulation
- first-hand empirical study in three urban locations mainly based on participatory observation
- the approach oscillates between a paternalistic and a participatory approach towards children
- it is assumed that the natural environment does have a special pedagogic quality
- Roger Hart is a geographer especially interested in children's place experience (place use, place knowledge and place feeling) in the outdoor environment
- only observation of children in their natural settings can lead to results with external validity (experiments cannot)
- children's geographic learning depends on their interests and their 'spontaneous geographic questions' which are revealed, for example, by their play
- variations of children's geographic expertise need to be investigated and explained
- as an anarchist thinker, Colin Ward is mainly interested in the subversive potential of children
- therefore he is especially interested in processes of appropriation (as a process in which children not only reinterpret but also take possession of places not suitable for them)
- he is confident that children can cope with the urban environment: if given enough freedom, children will find their way through the city and develop a capacity for self-reliance
- sees children as human beings; this is apparent in his description of children's business acumen
- the book, however, is not an empirical study; rather it is a new interpretation of existing literature

Conclusion

It is noticeable that in Germany the debate originated in (and is still dominated by) educational research and social work, while in the UK it can be clearly located within (social and cultural) geography. One could therefore assume that typical social science topics like gender, social class, international variations or ideological constructions (of rural childhoods) are more prominent in Germany than in the UK. But in fact, the contrary is true: British geographers have put much more emphasis on the interrelation of these social science categories and young people's mobilities than German educational scientists. In this respect, it is high time that the British (or Anglo-American) research about children's geographies is recognised and responded to in German-speaking countries.