Een veilig avontuur : alledaagse plaatsen en vrijetijdsbesteding in de verhalen van jongeren en ouders
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Safety is seen as a major social problem in contemporary western society. This is reflected in popular discourses about how parents should raise their children. Public space plays an important role in the fears parents express about their children’s safety. While research shows that people are more at risk at home, parents primarily worry about children’s safety in public. This concern is translated into a spatial and temporal regulation of the daily behaviour of children. Although a number of studies on this have been done for young children in different Western societies, research on teenagers is still lacking.

Research into the social spatial behaviour of this age group is of particular significance for a number of reasons. The time young people spend away from home, especially independent from parents, is generally seen as positive for the development of cognitive, creative and social skills. At this age, the life of young people is subject to relatively large changes. The transition from primary to secondary education coincides with the increase of independent mobility. From a geographical point of view this means travelling larger distances without the company of adults and the adventure of the discovery of new environments. Public space in the neighbourhood is of particular importance to this age group. Due to limited financial resources and legal restraints (e.g. no money for public transport and no right to drive), teenagers turn to the streets to experience the freedom that results from anonymity. Parents of young teenagers try to find a balance between recognizing the need of their children for independent mobility and protecting them from danger by restricting their independence.

This research elaborates on the issues raised above and focuses on the spare time of teenagers. The aim is twofold. The first is to give insight into the time-space behaviour of young people and the way the context enables and constrains them. Specific notice is given to the role of the social-spatial environment, in particular the place of residence. The second aim is to provide insight in the meaning of places in relation to parental concerns about the safety of their children, and the way this is translated into the regulation of their children’s time-space behaviour. Attention is paid to the extent and form of negotiations between caretakers and children on determining access to everyday locations. Particular consideration is given to the way in which young people are active in the process (i.e. contesting constraints) in order to create their own geographies.

The book contains four parts. The first part focuses on theory, methodology and methods. The second part discusses the social-spatial networks of young people. Parental concerns and the protective and restrictive measures parents impose, are the focus of part three. Conclusions are drawn in the last part of the book. Before the discussion turns to the summary of the different parts, the methodology and methods are reviewed.

Methodology and methods

The findings presented in this book are based on a range of research methods intended to explore the relationship between parental concerns and the use and experience of space by
SUMMARY

teenagers. Both quantitative and qualitative methodology and methods have been used to conduct the extensive empirical part of this project. The use of different methods allowed for a triangulation of the results. In addition to a review of the literature and secondary statistics, the methods of data collection included questionnaires, diaries kept by young people, in-depth interviews and field notes. A questionnaire was distributed to parents and their children through secondary schools. At a later stage 51 parent-child couples were selected to take part in in-depth interviews. In total 489 young people and 240 of their parents completed the questionnaire.

The teenagers who took part in the research were aged fourteen and fifteen. The respondents lived in different localities in the province of Groningen. These localities vary with respect to their social-economic and physical characteristics. Five different environments can be distinguished: the city centre of Groningen, a working class inner city neighbourhood in the city of Groningen (Oosterparkwijk), a high income residential area in the city of Groningen (De Wijert-Zuid), a suburban town in the countryside to the southwest of the city of Groningen (Leek) and a number of rural villages around Leek. Besides the differences in residential context, the gender and social-economic background of respondents have been focal points in this research.

Situating young people in their contexts

Part one elaborates on the relationships between young people, their parents and places. It starts with a short discussion of Hägerstrand's time geography (chapter 2). This theory illuminates the time-space constraints on our daily behaviour. The relationships between young people, their parents and places are more complicated than this theory suggests however. The deeper individual motives of people as purposive beings are underexposed in this tradition. For a good comprehension of time-space behaviour it is necessary to understand how young people and their parents come to construct the world around them. This brings the focus in this chapter to social-constructivism. To understand the behaviour of young people and their parents it is necessary to take stock of the collective interpretative schemes that guide their actions. In particular the spatial representations of safety and youth, as mobilised by individual agents and social groups are important issues for this research. Four powerful spatial representations are: the home as a safe environment, dangerous streets, the rural idyll and the city as a jungle.

Part one (chapter 3) also develops a number of key issues and trends on the basis of recent literature: the emergent risk culture, the way teenagers spend their spare time, parenting practices, parental feelings of insecurity, shifting public and private domains and the changing geography of rural and urban areas. Following Hajer and Reijndorp it is concluded that people increasingly hop from one protected domain to the other. The urban field has become an archipelago of enclaves in which people with different backgrounds have developed effective spatial strategies to meet those they want to meet, while avoiding others. On the basis of the literature, one would expect an expanding group of families construct the social-spatial networks of their children around carefully chosen safe and homogeneous places supervised by adults and easy to reach by car.
SUMMARY

Social spatial networks and the meaning of everyday places

Part two describes the social-spatial networks of 14 and 15 year olds in the province of Groningen. This is done from two different perspectives. In the first place, profiles of social-spatial networks are constructed. Secondly, the meaning of important everyday places is singled out: the home, the leisure club, the street and the discotheque. For each of these places, the meaning for youngsters as well as their parents and the negotiations between the both of them on determining access to these everyday locations is discussed. Above all, it becomes clear that the meaning of places is not static. It differs for teenagers, children and their parents, and varies in time and space.

Returning to the first perspective, the social-spatial networks were analysed on the basis of a wide range of variables, such as spatial orientation and the degree of independent mobility. The heterogeneity of the networks has been reduced by using a principal components analysis for categorical data. Five different profiles of social-spatial networks have been distinguished.

The largest group has been dubbed ‘in-and-out youngsters’ (uit-en-thuizers). This group is characterised by a divers leisure pattern. The young people in this group move in and out the home. They spend time in the neighbourhood and in places further away. Part of their time is used for organised activities supervised by adults, and another part is used for informal independent activities. A relatively large share of the teenagers with this profile lives in the inner city. It concerns both boys and girls.

In size, the ‘street kids’ (pleiners) comprise the second largest group. Their behaviour is characterised by a large share of informal activities (not controlled by adults) on the street in their own neighbourhood. A relatively large number of teens with this profile live in the working-class inner-city neighbourhood Oosterparkwijk. The group almost exclusively consists of boys. Within this group a subdivision has been made between ‘players’ (spelers) and ‘clubbers’ (stappers), but both go out in weekends. Their leisure time is almost exclusively spent with peers.

The group ‘protected youngsters’ (beschermden) has similar characteristics as the in-and-out youngsters. However the protected youngsters’ use of time and space is more controlled and organised. They spend relatively little time in public spaces. Movement outdoors at night takes place in the company of parents. Middle-class girls, especially from the countryside, are over-represented.

The profile of the ‘planners’ (planners) is characterised by a large amount of formal and organised leisure activities in clubs. These fixed club appointments tightly structure the use of all the spare time available and the use of space.

Finally a relatively small group spends its time predominately at home: the ‘at-homers’ (binnenjongeren).

The spatiality of parental concerns, protective- and restrictive measures

Part three discusses the concerns of parents and the ways they try to regulate the behaviour of their children. It is concluded that that safety is an important issue for parents of fourteen and fifteen year olds. In general, parents do not see their children as completely capable to preserve their own safety. Nevertheless there is a difference between these
parents and the parents of younger children. The first give their children more freedom of movement. An increase of independence is considered to be an integral part of growing up. The stories recorded clearly indicate that parents perform a balancing act between their desire to provide freedom and their anxiety about the dangers that go along with it.

These anxieties have two different origins. In the first place parents express concerns related to the vulnerability of children regarding contact with strangers and traffic. This concern is based on the idea of the innocent child in need of protection. (The so-called Apollonian image of childhood). Secondly, parents are concerned about the consumption of alcohol and drug abuse, violent behaviour and sexual activities. These worries refer to the concept of youth as troublemakers (The so-called Dionysian image of childhood). In general, parents emphasize the Apollonian image of childhood for their own children whilst the Dionysian image is predominantly used to represent the other children. Moreover, the precise nature of anxieties and the way these are translated into regulation are related to social-spatial environment, personal characteristics and gender and class identity.

While teenagers possess a degree of freedom of movement, parents to a larger or lesser extent, structure this freedom. In interacting with their children, parents regulate the social-spatial networks. The basic tactic followed by parents is a combination of protective and restrictive measures. The following measures can be distinguished: territorial regulation, bodily regulation, regulation by modes of mobility, regulation of activities, regulation of social contacts, temporal regulation and the deployment of aids.

From a geographical point of view territorial regulation forms a specific category. Parents structure space into safe versus dangerous places and routes. In so doing, they construct a scalar hierarchy in which the home forms the centre. In general the saying ‘unknown, unloved’ is applicable. Close to home, forbidden dangerous places are narrowly defined. Further away these forbidden places become entire areas. The scalar hierarchy is also recognizable in the way parents define the direct environment of the home as a safe area. In most cases the neighbourhood is considered safe. If parents consider their own neighbourhood dangerous, ‘the neighbourhood’ shrinks down to their own street. The curtailed neighbourhood encompasses the scale of the street. By fencing off the neighbourhood at a lower scale, parents order the space surrounding them as a safe place for their children.

In defining the spatial boundaries of their children’s life, parents mobilize the dominant spatial representation of safety and youth. The city is represented as a ‘jungle’ and the countryside as an idyllic place to raise kids. Likewise, parents refer to an image of youth that is better off indoors (the home as a safe environment) than wasting time on the streets (dangerous streets). That these representations strongly influence the thinking and acting of parents is shown by the fact that parental concerns are often related to public space. By regulating the mobility of their children in the public domain and at the same time privatising and formalising leisure time, the representations of ‘dangerous streets’ and ‘the house as a safe environment’ are mobilised. With respect to the representations ‘the rural idyll’ and ‘the city as a jungle’ the following can be remarked. Parents in all residential environments express worries about their children’s safety. However parents in the countryside are the most positive about their direct environment considering the safety for their sons and daughters. In their stories they systematically confront the period of youth in
the countryside with that in the city. The social-spatial network of young people from rural localities shows that visiting the city is strictly regulated in time and space. At night the whole city is dangerous and off-limits.

It should be noted that parents selectively use (and contest) these representations. This is clearly visible in the representation of youngsters as street-wise. The parents that hold this view put trust in their children that they are wise enough to stay out of trouble on the street. Not just dangerous streets, but also the rural idyll is contested. Parents in the countryside are the most protective with regard to the mobility of their children, mainly by frequently acting as chauffeurs. Parents from urban areas juxtapose the ‘dangers’ of the city against the inconveniences of the rural areas. At the same time, they emphasize the advantages of city life. While the idea of streetwise does not challenge the idea of the city as a jungle, this brings another image of the city to the fore: the city as an attractive place to live for young people because of the facilities offered and the safe routes ('eyes on the streets'), that allow for an independent safe experience.

A safe adventure

Part four of the dissertation contains concluding remarks and a brief discussion of the findings. It can be concluded that time-space behaviour of young people is diverse. For a large proportion of young people in the Netherlands, the home, the neighbourhood and more remote enclaves play an equally important role (in and out youngsters). Hence, the idea that an increasing number of families construct social-spatial networks of their children around carefully chosen safe and homogeneous places supervised by adults and easy to reach by car, is not indicative of for the majority of youngsters in this research. Although modernisation and individualisation, lifestyle and expanded opportunities are considered important, the structuring of individual spare time is still clearly dependent on traditional social identities such as age, gender, class and the residential environment. Social-spatial networks must be seen as a chain of different places that cannot be appropriately described by classic dichotomies such as neighbourhood/city centre, rural/urban or public/private. Indeed, it is the places that do not fit the traditional orientation of geographers that are important in the lives of young people. Mega-discotcheques in rural areas are public domains par excellence, although traditionally associated with the urban realm. Sport complexes are also important places for young people, although these sites are often located at a distance from residential neighbourhoods and the city centre. This reflects the spatial fragmentation of functions described under different names in the geographical literature, such as urban field, urban networks and archipelago of enclaves.

Nevertheless it is remarkable that for most fourteen and fifteen year olds, the neighbourhood remains vital for hanging around and having fun. A particular group, that is, boys with a working-class background in the inner city, almost entirely turn to the streets of their neighbourhood in their leisure time.

The social-spatial network of young people is influenced by parents who, amongst other rationales, are guided by concerns about their children’s safety. (Nevertheless, this is not a straightforward process. Children are active agents in the process determining the
boundaries of their time-space behaviour.) With respect to these concerns, places have multiple meanings. For one, parents mobilise different spatial images of childhood, safety and leisure time (such as the rural idyll) to determine the boundaries of social-spatial networks. In addition, anxieties are locally embedded. Fears are attached to concrete physical and social environmental characteristics. Yet parental concerns are not exclusively based on the places where their children go: here the influence of the mass media becomes apparent. In their stories, parents refer to violence and dangerous places in the Netherlands and abroad. Furthermore, they contrast the lives of their children with the time when they were young. In general, they consider society to be more dangerous now than in those days. In this sense, there is a general sense of risk awareness that is not locally restricted.

Protective and restrictive measures eventually structure the social-spatial network of young people into what I call ‘a safe adventure’. In using this term, emphasis is placed on the balance between giving young people freedom and the desire to protect them from perceived dangers. Several approaches can be distinguished that try to strike a balance between protecting and enabling. The first is privatisation: parents can offer their children a degree of freedom at home, which normally is associated with the public domain. An extreme example is the transformation of the family garage into a youth club. Secondly, parents can encourage fixed appointments in time and space preferably under supervision of adults (sports club, music lessons, etc.). Third, parents include and exclude certain activities and (trustworthy or untrustworthy) people with respect to their children. An example is the active promotion and organisation of peer networks, which play an important role in improving the safety of independent mobility. Finally, technological control mechanisms can be introduced. A mobile phone enables youths to warn their parents, while at the same time giving parents the opportunity to monitor their child’s time-space behaviour.
"En toen bleek dus dat zij een clubje had waar gokdrugs en alcohol gehanteerd werden, toen ik dit hoorde, toen heb ik hier thuis de garage opengegooid en de jeugd zei hier regelmatig in de garage?

= Moeders van een 14-jarige moeder =

"Vroeger was ik altijd in de buurt, want toen waren er veel kinderen, maar sinds ik op de middelbare school zit, kom ik er eigenlijk vrij weinig, omdat ik zo weinig vrij tijd heb."

= 14-jarige moeder =

"Dat is gewoon een beetje een luid buurde. Daar lopen geslaagde jongelingen rond, terwijl hier gewoon veel kleine kinderen vrij vaak hier lopen zijn. Je hebt punten hier, daar is het flauw, flauw, flauw."

= 14-jarige jongen =