

Children and the Use of Social Space: Some Anthropological Considerations Over Nature and Nurture in Cross-Cultural Contexts

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KEYWORDS Open-Door. Closed-Door. Safety. Hierarchy of Needs

ABSTRACT Cross-culturally there is little individualised use of space by children and it is dictated by considerations of safety, range of sight, house and compound construction and familial social requirements.

INTRODUCTION

“The twentieth century can be characterised as a time when increasing numbers of people have become disengaged or dislocated from national, regional, and ethnic locations or identities. As travel, changing locations, and leaving home become central experiences for more and more people in modernity, the difference between the ways we travel, the reasons for our movements, and the terms of our participation in this dynamic must be historically and politically accounted for.” (Kaplan, 1998)

Kaplan approaches the issue of changing trends in the movement of individuals and populations from a geo-social and geo-political perspective. Such a perspective unquestionably accounts for many of the global travel patterns observed in modern times. However, the wide range of individual differences in travel and movement within homogenous socio-political groups suggests the need to also account for psychological influences. The author examines psychological influences from a developmental perspective as a dominant precursor to historical and political influences, and as an additional factor in response to precursory historical and political influences.

Children are given names and from this they have a socially recognised individuality. However from birth they have an initial and long lasting dependency on others which is more extreme than in any other species. From this comes restrictions on their use of space and a certain nervousness over its use beyond the boundaries of psychological and social safety. Therefore it is necessary to see the cross-cultural use of space by children in terms of biological, ethological and

environmental factors before these can be correlated to more individualistic social and psychological ones for which the anthropological perspective is particularly relevant.

BIOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE USE OF SPACE

For space to have any social significance for children there has to be the physical ability to move and develop the biological capacities to cope with varying social and geographical environments. Each child should be born with the physiological elements without which he/she can have no viable functions in their society. So it would seem that initially children must be physically able to use space. Any physical deficiencies in such capacities means that in subsistence communities there will be an immediate loss of physically defective children since their carers do not have the means whatever their moral ideologies to keep alive those who occupy space but cannot use it productively. The severely handicapped just do not survive very long amongst the millions of Sukuma in Tanzania

In economically developed societies such children will be kept alive by social welfare systems and the many non-governmental organisations carrying out specialised care (Meadow, 1975). The productive potential of the child is not an issue; moral understandings and economic surpluses over basic needs keep them alive. This would mean that proportionately there will be more defective users up of space and resources in the latter societies and that the former will have more potentially able children growing into adolescence should they survive high rates of infant mortality.

Social space is ego-centred at whatever age it is considered and this is always closely correlated to biological ability; clutching, crawling, tottering and walking abilities. It is an expanding circle of usable space enabled by these biological abilities.

The Primacy of Biological Needs in the Use of Space

The children's use of space correlates to a hierarchy of personal needs which parallels that of their adults and whose needs they emulate and develop into similar courses of behaviour (Maslow, 1987), which initially are largely independent of culture.

The primary needs of children in the use of space are physiological and they will move towards food and fluids when hungry or thirsty. Once this has been satisfied their next concern in the use of space is for safety which is shown in the common preferences for the familiar rather than the unknown in their choice of localities into which to move. Self preservation is the first consideration in any hierarchy of human needs and every human consideration is subordinated to this. Children who eat alone like the higher anthropoids look around into the distance after each bite or two as if scanning the horizons for safety (Hass, 1968).

Above the fulfilment of these basic needs there are the social and more individualistic ones such as belongingness which is similarly closely related to the use of space but which may have an ethological basis. It is important to note that young children are not capable of autonoetic consciousness and therefore, lack the capacity to recollect the past and/or anticipate the future through episodic memory. Consciousness of subjective time allows us to be aware of our existence in future contexts, motivating our 'here and now'. It has been suggested that the population with impaired consciousness of subjective time include children between 1-4 years of age, adults with organic brain injuries (especially the frontal lobes), and non-human animals, and that this to some extent will hamper their motivations to explore beyond those environments known to the child. It may not all be about the need to stay in the home environment as it may be due to a lack of consciousness of alternative locations.

Ethological Factors in the Use of Space

Even if we do not fully accept that there is a

genetic element in human behaviour which is shared with many other lower order species in the care of their young, the behaviour of the higher anthropoid apes may have significance. The inherited factors which contribute to children's use of space appears to precede variable nurturing systems. At the very least humans have a genetically programmed concern for their young and probably for their young to be satisfied that this care exists as part of the need for humans to survive as a species; to disregard the safety and food needs of the young would be biological suicide.

The primate background shows that children are usually maintained by the group in which they are born and that the group as a whole takes an interest in their safety. It is not particularly parental care except for the mother-child dyad. The composition of the group providing safety is dictated as much by nurture as by nature. What is 'nature' is the group concern over children. What is 'nurture' is the social composition of the concerned group; the occupiers of the geographical circle within which safety is provided whether in human terms these are nuclear, extended or classificatory families.

Support for this ethological approach might be in the fact that mentally ill persons are especially territorial and aware of rank order (Esser, 1971). Mentally retarded boys initially fought for personal territories and once these were established, quarrelling became rare (Palluck and Esser, 1971). Although it is correct that humans through nurture largely create the forms of their environment, it is in line with nature that territory is established in the first place (Sommer, 1966). Pleater et al. (2002) noted children's ability to use aerial photographs as maps. Therefore, a trip to the top of a hill should allow a sense of how to navigate to beneficial locations. This has implications for the beginnings of navigation in our history.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS CONSTRAINING THE CHILD'S USE OF SPACE

Apart from night as opposed to day providing the child with a sense of danger from outside their homes or the fences of their compounds, what they can see provides for the reduction of danger as in the open savannah landscape of environment within which the Sukuma and many

pastoral peoples live as opposed to the closed in nature of compounds surrounded by forest in which children cannot see very far as in some parts of Zaire, Nigeria and among tribal communities in India. The Kachin child in northern Myanmar sees the village on the next hill across the valley so that hearing their cocks crowing and sight may coincide

There are many factors outside the control of individual families and communities which reduce or enable their children to use space in particular ways. Climate and the geographical environment have wide ranging effects on what children can do; floods restrict movement while the failure of rain may force them with their parents to scavenge beyond their neighbourhoods. Daylight may enable movement with seasonal variations outside the tropical zones. Extreme heat and cold reinforces more limited indoor uses of space; the Eskimo child is not likely to go outside during the winter except to defecate so that there may be cycles of growth as with trees. Pastoral people and indeed many urban slum dwellers in India where there are no domestic latrines may only defecate at night with different patterns for girls and boys to learn.

Political instability and prolonged civil wars either cause children to stay as near to home as possible or cause them to migrate and become refugees which similarly will discourage most children from straying from the immediate nearness of their carers. They may find themselves as members of dominant or penalised minorities which expand or reduce their safety limits. Children and adolescents of minorities in Western cities know very little about areas beyond their neighbourhoods.

Fluctuations in the prices of commodities on the world markets will affect what the child is enabled to do or not do and with what. The parents having more money may correlate to the children moving over wider areas. This might be related to giving children new clothes for festivals and their wish to parade their finery to others.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS COMBINING NATURE AND NURTURE

The individual child is born with the bases of their personalities; there is not much that can be done by nurture for the less intelligent ones. Some will have tendencies to have dominant or submissive, fearful or exploratory personalities

and it may be that boys are more likely to venture beyond the home environment at younger ages than girls and in larger numbers.

Each child is born with the elements of a spatial sense which they use to navigate around their environment and to keep track of where things are. They have a network of constantly updated mental maps organised with different reference frames from the use of their eyes, nose, and hands (Pinker, 2002: 220). Children approach prominent points in their environment without any special reason perhaps because of this orienting mechanism (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1975: 462).

After the primary needs for food and safety have been met there are the less imperative needs which appear as the children grow into adolescence for esteem and self-actualisation activated and enabled by particular social environments. This is probably worked out outside the domestic environment within groups of age mates in which their status is not preordained by birth order and family standing; the interest of the gang in obtaining and defending its territory.

SOCIAL FACTORS IN THE USE OF SPACE WHICH RELATE TO NURTURE

The child learns early that within the home and its surrounding there are restrictions on where they can go and when. Defecation areas divided by sex occur in all communities in which there is no indoor sanitation; left along the beach for women on the coast of East Africa and uphill for them among the Ssonjo of Tanzania. Where there is indoor sanitation in high status households, lavatories of parents will not be used by their children nor will the children use those of the servants. Household Japanese Shinto and Hindu shrines will only be approached at certain times with their behaviour appropriately modified. Orthodox Muslim and Hindu households will be divided into male and female sections and in ordinary European households the kitchen is a female area and the outside of the house male.

The larger the family unit or the unit of living in which everyone knows everyone else, the larger the safety area within which children can wander and be kept an eye on. The Swahili village near Pangani in Tanzania in which 34 out of 35 households were related was totally safe for children but not an English village of comparable size which have numbers of new-comers and commuters living there.

The Hindu joint household in which parents, sons and their wives live in a single building, the Sukuma compound containing much the same patrilineally related people, the Mexican family compound with walls round a courtyard and polygynous and polyandrous families with several fathers and mothers, all provide wider safety areas than that of the urban isolated nuclear family. Often the safety limits are defined by walls and thick thorn fences which confine the child automatically, even though they are designed to keep strange people out.

Often the child does not go unaccompanied into outside space beyond the line of sight except for going to markets with adult companions and to religious festivals where the possibility of getting lost is greater. The Kumba Mela festival on the banks of the Ganges attended by many millions of Hindus has children who are permanently lost as they do not know the names of their parents; for children there is the terrifying nature of mass crowds of unknown people.

There is no clear geographical circle of safety within which children operate once they are cognisant of their surroundings. Within the surrounding world of undefined but suspected difficulties and dangers, there will always be outposts of safety. There are real and classificatory relatives, fathers and mothers other than the natural ones and aunts and uncles particularly grand-parents because of social relationships with their parents and generally a preference or the affection of matri-lateral relatives in patrilineal communities. There are people in other communities with whom there are long-term socially accepted safe relationships; the age grade connections of their siblings, joking relationships beyond that of alternate generations and some of the cohorts of similar aged children with whom they are in schools.

Since these inhabited areas of safety may not be geographically nearby, corridors of safety between them are often provided by special escorts; children will soon notice that women outside their households rarely walk alone; they move over outside space in groups to the river for water, bathing and to wash clothes. The recent experience of Roman Catholic children in Belfast, Northern Ireland being escorted to a primary school through lines of violently abusive Protestant women is an extreme case of this.

Open Door Communities

These are communities in which there are

grouped considerations in the minds of those that live there and sufficient trust for no doors to be closed as a necessary part of their personal security by day as opposed to night. So there is distinctive behaviour in open door societies in which families are not enclosed by the imputed hostility of the surrounding environment in which safety and social horizons coincide. Very few who enter this circle are unknown except for pre-defined persons from outside agencies, school, health and police inspectors who are a source of suspicion rather than danger.

In such communities there is a domesticated closeness in how children experience space. They sleep in the same beds with their mothers and there is prolonged breast feeding on demand as with the Amish who have no fixed feeding schedules for their children. Children are carried on their mothers' backs as they work in the fields and it may be that they learn these safety limits from this view point before they can walk.

Within the home restrictions on their crawling and toilet training are not an early imposed space and behavioural imposition. As soon as they can walk they learn special restrictions on their free movement in their communities but this is dictated by local convention rather than by physical barriers. The individuality of children in the use of space is worked out in a group context.

Closed Door Communities

Outside these small communities in which virtually everyone is known, there are larger communities in which front-doors are always closed and only opened with prudence. It is a confined space in which children are brought up within an ideology of individualism.

Children sleep separately to their mothers and in beds which have fenced sides. The play-pen into which the child moves from the cot is a parallel to the cattle-pen and recognised as such by the Sukuma and it restricts exploratory movements. They are tied into push chairs when leaving the house and harnessed when walking which parallels the treatment of domestic dogs.

Urban-industrial societies have many physical and legally enforceable formal barriers to restrict free movement by doors, walls, fences, barbed wire, gates, notices about trespassing and privacy. The growing child's experience of outside and internal space is largely negative. The ideological individuality of the child is restricted by their formal alienation from most of the space with which they are surrounded.

The Hinge of Safety

As children grow up there is the hinge of safety in their use of space up to the point when their safety ceases to be the concern of the adults or neighbours with whom they have grown up. At that point the child or adolescent becomes aware of other factors beyond the fence of domesticity.

Instead of physical and social safety being assured within a circle of known individuals, there comes a balance between safety carried forward from known safe situations and people into areas in which there are no such assurances. They have to work out for themselves if it is socially valuable to proceed into outside areas; if so how far and under what circumstances. The further the children go from the ego centred safety of the domestic environment, the greater the sense of insecurity which surrounds this functional hinge.

CONCLUSIONS

It would seem that nature provides children with both the psychological ways and the biological means to make use of the spaces into which they are born and in which they develop both socially and biologically. It may be that only on the fringes of these restrictions that children can develop individualised uses of space; they

are creatures of the social and geographical open and closed door social environments into which they are born and in which they develop. There is greater freedom for children in the former than in the latter communities which idealise individuality and in effect have social systems preventing its realisation.

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