

LEISURE GEOGRAPHIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE: CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on progress with an ongoing cross-cultural research project currently being conducted by members of the Commission located in Asia, Europe and Australia. As an official project of the IGU-CGE the aim of the project is to assess the influence of globalisation on the lives of young people who may live in culturally diverse settings but who almost universally have access to the Internet and homogenising influences in their daily lives such as food, music and clothing outlets. Based on their leisure and recreational pursuits including favourite places, this cross-cultural research has the possibility of offering a tentative theory of adolescent thinking, and development – especially the personal geographies of young people and their related sense of place. Major questions explored in the research are:

- To what extent has globalisation penetrated the lives of young people?
- What kinds of spatial constructions shape the social identities of young people?
- What are their reference systems?
- How do they use private and public spaces?
- How valid are the traditional reference systems of home, family and neighbourhood?
- Crossing borders how homogenised is the voice of youth?

Relevant theoretical positions that are instructive for this process are summarised below followed by a brief progress report on the methodology and colleagues' contributions.

BACKGROUND THEORY

Educating for effective citizenship in a world of time-space compression and instant access to diverse sources of information is problematic. Many writers now acknowledge the new meanings being given to space and place along with the 'new' geographies being generated by current information and communication technologies (Harvey 2002; Matthews et al. 1999; Mitchell 2000; Robertson and Gerber 2001). Researchers report on studies that examine the behaviours of young people in specific and varied contexts (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Skelton and Valentine 2000). However, there appears to be very little research comparing behaviours in different cultural contexts.

Leisure is strongly identified with the culture of adolescence (Passmore & French 2001). Particularly in Western societies, leisure reportedly occupies 40% of their waking time. Yet, in contrast to time spent in family and school contexts, leisure has been under investigated. Influenced by mass media and marketing, the nature of leisure is complex, dynamic, and reflective of current social trends that merge adolescent peer cultures with childhood (Holloway & Valentine 2000; Kong *et al.*;

Skelton, & Allen 1999; Skelton & Valentine 2001; Zeijl *et al.* 2000). Several key themes are evident in the research extant.

1. Globalisation, Leisure and Information and Communication Technologies: In Tell's view: "How has technology influenced youth culture? Technology is youth culture" (1999/2000, p.11). Time-space compression has changed lifestyles irrevocably (Furnham *et al.* 2001; McDowell 1999). Multi-media transmissions, electronic communications and transnational merchandising outlets, dominate popular international culture (Crouch 1999).

Internet uses – private and public space: Home use of computers appears dominated by recreational use (Robertson *et al.* 2001). Borzekowski & Ricket's (2001) research with 412 suburban New Yorkers report that half of the sample used the Internet to access health information, especially related to sensitive issues such as safe sex and birth control.

ICT and Learning Outcomes: The test of whether improved learning outcomes are linked with ICT proficiency and access at home and/or school is currently being investigated in a number of studies. The indicators are that young people with higher levels of ICT proficiency will have better learning outcomes over time (Becta Report 2001). Increasingly researchers are recognising the influence of home computers either shared with other siblings and parents or available in the privacy of personal bedrooms. The question then is how their use of computers in their leisure time contributes to their skills and feeling of self-confidence to achieve in learning areas and enhance their life chances. The Internet is being observed in schools as providing opportunities for learning group cooperative skills and increasing abilities to negotiate (Chang 2001; Goldsmith 2001).

2. Gender differences: Tiggeman (2001)'s study of girls (mean age 16 years) notes their more likely tendency to participate in structured sports (49%). Other studies suggest that girls see recreation spaces such as theme parks as dominated by boys and not safe, thus spending more time alone and in their bedrooms with their music, televisions and videos (James 2001; Passmore & French 2001; Robertson & Rikkinen 2000; Zeijl *et al.* 2000). James reports on boys spending double the amount of time as girls on sports and the reverse pattern for arts and music. Issues relate to need for private time alone or time spent with others in public spaces (Dale *et al.* 2000; McKinney 1998; Tarrant *et al.* 2001).

3. Structured activities: home/parent influences: An estimated quarter of UK Gamblers Anonymous members are young people (Fisher 2001). Time spent in amusement arcades can lead to contact with anti-social behaviour with resultant deviance (especially boys) and poor parent-child relations. Both boys and girls who participate in schools' extra-curricula activities are less likely to have deviant behaviour patterns and belong to two-parent families. Television watching, for instance, is linked to low self esteem and sport participation to higher self-esteem (Tiggeman 2001). Social class differences contribute with evidence of closer parental concern for 'planned' leisure time among higher social classes and better-educated parents (Zeijl *et al.* 2000).

4. Cross-cultural impact of ICT: Tomlinson refers to the ICT phenomenon as the 'triumph of the West' (1999). The impact of this observation was well illustrated at the 2000 UNESCO-ACEID International Conference on Education in Bangkok where the

Ministerial official keynote speaker spoke of her concern within the Asian region of the newly emerging cultural tensions associated with the spread of Internet access, particularly among the young¹. The value system of the net is considered Western and a threat to traditional family values and intergenerational behaviours. Furthermore, the predominance of English as the language of communication is viewed as likely to widen the gap between parents and children. Children are seen as having some access to new technologies through school but more adaptable to change aligned with popular culture via net cafes and other commercial outlets away from the gaze of teachers and parents. An antidote to the dominance of English as the language of communication could well be changing quite rapidly as the Internet culture spreads through Asian countries. The question of its challenge to traditional values seems more difficult to measure.

In brief, global forces increasingly dominate youth leisure. Gender differences in type and structure of preferred and actual activities have links to school learning outcomes. What we need to know is the content of these daily experiences and the specific leisure time choices likely to make for improved lifestyle chances aimed at active citizenship with risk avoidance, and enhanced learning outcomes. In this sense the networks of geographic educators are well placed to make a significant contribution to important and much needed research into adolescent development and cognition.

THE CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH PROJECT

Case-study research in 6 countries respectively located in Europe, Asia and Australia provides the evidence for the theory building. Using innovative research techniques each local case study explores the questions raised in the introduction to this paper. Findings from Australia and Finland were first reported at the Korean IGU-CGE symposium (Robertson and Rikkinen 2000). Other data collections include samples by colleagues located in Honk Kong (Refer Professor John Lee); Singapore (Professor Christine Lee); Sweden (Refer Professor Torgny Ottosson); and in England (Refer Professor Ashley Kent and colleagues). Analyses for all these case studies are to be reported in a forthcoming book publication edited by Robertson and Williams (2002 in press).

The research reported in the case studies uses a common technique designed to engage young people in conversations about their leisure and recreation time. Two major instruments are being used. First, a survey questionnaire to gauge the variety of activity, favourite places, time spent and general demographic features of family and home. Second, an interview with open-ended questions related to a collection of 50 photographs selected to be culturally sensitive and reflective of known adolescent interests and popular culture locally, nationally and globally. Whilst themes in the photographic collection reflect similar variables - especially those signaled in the literature - in some contexts the actual photographs used have been selected to reflect local settings. Hence one collection has been used in Hong Kong and Singapore. Another collection has been used in Finland, Sweden and Australia. However, for some settings in England the collection has been modified to take into account more culturally diverse populations. Specific themes represented in the collection include home and family; sports (includes skateboards, swimming, netball

and football); nature and environment; technology; shopping malls; food and clothing outlets. Questions are designed to gather information related to the following.

- How, where and with whom school age children spend their leisure time at home, with friends and other places.
- Age related differences in type, content and place experience.
- Suggestions of possible values and reference systems that relate to citizenship issues.
- Recommendations for classroom based teaching and learning.

Early analyses have suggested the diverse reference systems that face young people. They raise issues of contemporary citizenship in a globalised world where the commodification of knowledge blurs boundaries and values. However there is evidence of global, national and local dimensions of growing up in the post-modern world. Illustrations of these categories follow.

- Global in origin – i.e. influenced by global communications systems such as the Internet, mobile phones and Television programs including ‘soaps’, the news, global events and movements related to environmental concerns (sustainability) and social justice (gay rights, poverty, street kid cultures - homeless youth); computer games and mobilenets; fast food chains such as McDonald’s; popular culture icons including, fashion, sports and leisure activities such as music, skateboarding and scooters.
- National in origin – related to civic and citizenship issues at a national and local level. i.e. what is considered ‘cool’ by peers including sports, music and clothes.
- Local in origin – community and family based values and boundaries around behaviours including ethical, moral and religious conformity. i.e. street behaviours - where to ‘hang out’, with whom and what happens?

Other questions follow – when communicating with people/friends/family by email or telephone do they seek connection with people located nearby, in other parts of their country or links with people internationally? Communications can in turn then be about matters of local, national or global connection. Space and locations are fluid. The person can be operating in a local space but involved with global connections such as a world news program, sporting event or matter of global concern such as environmental monitoring, sustainability, global warming etc. One way to classify these interactions is via a matrix. This matrix provides a method of analysis for comparing the data from the various settings. For example:

Global communications – local content e.g. email with relative in another country
National communications – local content e.g. send a letter to a friend by post, telephone or email
Local communications – local content – ‘hanging out’ in the shopping mall
Global communications – national content
National communications – national content
Local communications – national content

Global communications – global content
National communications – global content
Local communications – global content

TOWARDS A THEORY OF YOUTH CULTURE

Using the proposed matrix of global, national and local content revealed in the various studies there is an attempt to tease out the various dimensions of young people's lives and lifestyles including culturally specific issues and events. Themes include the importance of:

- having personal space and privacy including one's own bedroom. This theme has been common in all interviews conducted regardless of place and cultural background. Young people seek 'quiet' time away where it is possible to reflect and interact with friends away from adult supervision.
- time for friends and 'being cool', 'hanging out' and visits to favourite places occupies a large slice of their waking hours.
- nature and peace and quiet. Especially in Finland this place category has been shown to be very important and perhaps reflective of a desire for relief during the summer from high density living during the long winter months.
- Family – not surprisingly, the importance and security provided by family is universal. 'Home' is commonly the 'favourite place' of young people.
- surface pursuits versus more deeply embedded beliefs and activities. This category is perhaps the most likely to reveal dimensions of local values that may separate communities from global and national forces. One aspect revealed in interviews relates to censorship, which may have religious origins.

SUMMARY

Educational researchers now recognise that research into classroom based instruction urgently needs advice based on research rather than supposition. This cross-cultural project is providing a fascinating insight into the discerning values of young people. As they reveal their hopes and dreams within the knowledge society created by globalisation the young people involved in this cross-cultural enquiry also highlight their conservatism and traditional core values of their homes and families. As one Year 6 Finnish boy observed of the photographs: "This photo can't be Finnish because all the people look so happy, smiling and active in the park!". The cultural perception of this 12 year old reminds us that projected images and stereotypes remain a strong element in the socialising processes of young people.

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ⁱ Refer Web site < <http://www.unescobkk.org/education/aceid/conference/index6.htm>>