Children's and young people's leisure culture

Anna Sparrman

Book Chapter

Cite this chapter as:

Sparrman, A. Children's and young people's leisure culture, In Sparrman, A. (eds), **Making culture: Children's and young people's leisure cultures**, Göteborg: Kulturanalys Norden; 2019, pp. 7-17. ISBN: 9789187046605

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Introduction

This is a research anthology about children's and young people's leisure cultures in the Nordic countries. Children's and young people's practices take centre stage in this book for the purpose of exploring culture from within their own practices, focusing on what they *do* (Sparrman, Samuelsson, Lindgren & Cardell 2016; Sparrman, Sandin & Sjöberg 2012). In this book, this is expressed through, how leisure culture creates social mobility, how children move between and multitask digital technologies and platforms, and how they on a regular basis are engaged and active in multiple cultural activities such as going to the theatre, singing, or online gaming. It also engages with leisure culture in terms of venues where people, objects, ideas, imaginations, and pleasures move in and out of one another. The concept of culture is in constant motion through the chapters entangling social processes with cultural processes, cultural heritage with popular and digital culture, doing and making in practice with place, and markets with cultural policies. This collection demonstrates that leisure culture gets its meanings in and through social relations and is not solely the expressions of individual identity work.

To understand this heterogeneity, Tony Blackshaw's (2010) concept of "liquid leisure" is handy.[1] The concept emphasises and takes into consideration that leisure practices are complexly set up. They are in constant motion and are unstable, they flow and are fluid, moving and mobile in different ways along with the brittleness and breakability of social relations. We need to be open minded and follow the liquidity of children's and young people's leisure cultures if we want to understand the whats and the whys of their doings and how they explore and exploit their freedom. To stay with this unruliness opens for seeing and highlighting new aspects of leisure culture such as how pleasure, happiness, and imagination matter to children and young people when engaging in cultural activities.

The aim with this book is to make visible aspects of children's and young people's leisure cultures that public cultural policy seldom highlights. We ask: How and with whom are children and young people engaging in leisure culture? Where and when is this being done, and why? These questions feed into the central message of the collection, that we have to understand children's and young people's leisure

[1] *In his development of the concept, Blackshaw (2010) draws on Zygmunt Bauman's (2004) concept of liquid modernity.*

cultures in and through the practices where they are being performed and done (Sparrman et al. 2016; Sparrman, Sandin & Sjöberg 2012).

The outline of this introduction sets off with a historical contextualization of child and youth culture to situate the actions performed by children and young people in the book. Following on this is the exploration of the three key aspects of "aged by culture", "the pleasure of culture", and "configuring the doers". The last and third aspect will be discussed in the concluding chapter of the book, "Configuring the doers", which reflects on the heterogeneity of the "doers" (children and young people), what and who turns them into "doers", and what this implies for our understanding of children's and young people's leisure cultures. To conclude the book with the doers is a way to encourage the reader to hold on to, and keep thinking about, the complexities of leisure cultures from the point of view of children and young people themselves.

There are multiple ways of reading this book. Some texts are short and some are long. The (s) in the list of contents marks the short texts. Read as a unit, these short texts build a story that challenges concepts or ideas that we take for granted about children's and young people's leisure cultures, while the longer texts immerse the reader leading us deeper into what is continuously ongoing in children's and young people's everyday leisure cultures. The introduction and concluding chapter can be read as one piece making a larger argument situating the book. It is also possible to just straightforwardly follow the layout of the book and read it from cover to cover. The book is divided into five parts. Part I introduces the topic of the book by situating it theoretically and statistically. Part II-IV brings together issues on creativity, cultural pleasure and finally cultural participation. The final part V brings the book to a closure. Each section begins with one of the shorter texts broadly situating the other chapters. It should be clear, though, that each chapter stands by itself and that some chapters are more essayistic and others more scientific.

Child and youth culture

To understand the leisure cultures discussed in the chapters of this book, it is necessary to get a picture of the history of the concepts of child and youth culture.[2] The concepts of child culture and youth culture have different historical and theoretical backgrounds. While child culture was established during the 19th century, youth culture grew out of the new category of teenagers during the 1950s (Hebdige 1979; Klein 1998; Sparrman et al. 2016). Youth culture for many equals sub-culture, resistance, and subversion, while child culture's genealogy derives from the establishment of compulsory schooling, children's separation from labour, and the need for keeping children off the streets (e.g. Cohen 1980; Hebdige 1979; Klein 1989; Sparrman et al. 2016; Willis 1977). The aim with establishing

[2] *Youth culture here covers the category of youth and young adults.*

children's books, playgrounds, camps, and toys was to make children more child-like and make them, or give them, the position of being worthy of protection (Klein 1989).

This historical process of change in what was perceived to be good (schooling) or bad for children (unsupervised street life) might be one reason for why the notion of child culture still seems to personify goodness (Sparrman et al 2016). Instead of goodness, youth culture's subversive characteristic links to the modern idea of the "wild" teenager. The point here is that child and youth culture is morally charged through social contextual aspects, as well as through how we define words like child and youth.

"The child" and "the youth" in child and youth culture derive from different theoretical traditions; child culture draws on the innocent child and developmental psychology, while youth culture sees youths as political and social actors sprung out of sociology (Jenkins 1998; Klein 1989). These theoretical starting points affect how we then understand the culture made for and by children and youth. While youth culture stands steady in sociology and cultural studies, child culture over the last 15–20 years has developed through the interdisciplinary field of Child Studies and the notion of children as social and cultural actors situated *in* society (Mouritsen & Qvortrup 2002; Sparrman 2002; Sparrman 2011; Sparrman et al. 2016). Children's actions constitute, at the same time as they are constituted by, society (James & Prout 1990; Prout 2005). This "new" sociological approach theoretically brings child- and youth culture closer to one another than they have ever been, and both traditions now focus on children and young people as cultural producers rather than passive consumers of culture. This is an aspect emphasised in this book.

An important contribution of this anthology is that it focuses on topics, contents, and groups of children and young people that usually have a hidden position in cultural politics. This book takes a broad and inclusive approach to leisure culture and has as an aim to include as many categories of children and young people as possible. By this, we embrace the less-abled bodies of children and youth (Gustafsson this volume), we look into LGBTQ+ children's and young people's literary re-writings (Duggan this volume), we acknowledge indigenous children's and young people's cultural engagements (Montgomery-Andersen; Ní Bhroin this volume), and we point out how children's and young people's leisure culture is gendered beyond the young, white, abled man (Björnsson; Buhl; Landwehr Sydow this volume). In other words, we emphasise all children's and young people's right

to cultural participation (Hultgren this volume).[3] It is feminism that has made it possible to embrace and include more groups and people into leisure research helping us see that everyone's perspective matters if we want to know something about societies in general, and the meanings of leisure culture more specifically (Henderson 2013).

Focusing on the practices of what children and young people do, this book challenges and makes visible those norms and values that are taken for granted about child and youth culture. It illustrates how values are enacted by children and young people as such, as well as by their leisure activities. Some of the book chapters are explicitly written in contradiction to taken-for-granted norms and morals of good and/or bad (Buhl; Duggan; Gustafsson; Hrechaniuk; Landwehr Sydow; Ní Bhroin; Söderman; Vestad this volume). The point is that child culture does not come with intrinsic values of goodness or that all young people's cultural activities are subversive or even have the aim of being subversive, there are always children and young people who seriously explore life through culture. This collection contributes an understanding of children's and young people's leisure cultures as ongoing and situated in their lives while also questioning perceived pre-defined values as well as any potential marginalisation of their actions.

Aged by culture

Age has implicitly in different ways already been touched upon as the concepts of child culture and youth culture signal age distinctions. Organising cultural activities in accordance with a biological age linearity starting with the child, moving on to the youth, and then to the adult is a common strategy (Sparrman et al. 2016). What we discover when we look at this linearity is that culture follows a developmental pattern, as well as that adult culture is the norm against which child and youth culture are measured (Sparrman et al. 2016). Children and young people are often talked about in terms of age. They can be too young for their age, not acting their age, too old for some things, or aged by culture through their perceived inabilities (Sparrman 2018b).

Children's and young people's leisure cultures are consequently what we can call "aged by culture" (Gullett 2003; Sparrman 2018b). To be "aged by culture" means focusing on how established organisations such as, in this case, national cultural policies or markets use age to segment consumers or to measure visitor groups.

[3] *See also Article 31 the UN Convention on the Right of the Child:*
"1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. 2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity." (United Nations 1989).

Age is thereby not an objective stable category its meanings are always negotiated in and through practices.

In statistical measurements of cultural habits, age is dominant (Björnsson; Merikivi, Myllyniemi and Salasuo; Ólafsson this volume). Age is in these cases a homogenising category presenting children of the same age as coherent cohorts doing the same things. It is therefore, just as pointed out in this book, important to take a critical stance to how statistics of children and young are organised and to ask ourselves what we are measuring, what we want to know, and what we find (Ólafsson this volume).

The fact that most statistical measures are based on self-reporting questionnaires also leaves out large groups of children and young who might not be able to read and/or answer questionnaires (Ólafsson this volume). Other methods are needed, for example, the qualitative ethnographic method studying small children who have not yet learned to read (Johansen; Vestad this volume) and children and young people with disabilities (Gustafsson this volume), both of which are groups of children and young people who have difficulties finding their ways into statistics or research. Measurements of cultural habits are in this way always selective.

At the same time, the surveys presented in this volume deflate preconceptions such as that children only hang out on digital media. They rather illustrate how children play theatre, write, and perform songs and how smartphones are broadly supplied by parents as tools for communication and control (Björnsson; Merikivi et al. this volume). Sometimes the division by age raises more questions than it answers. If young adults spend more time making music, is it because they play more music themselves or because they have become youth leaders for younger children? Focusing on numerical age hides information on who children and young people are doing culture with: by oneself, with peers, with people the same age, or with people who one shares an actual interest with regardless of age?

Age is also a market product, and many of the objects and commodities used by children and young people in their leisure cultures are age related. Products like computer games and films come with age restrictions, while children's books have age suggestions (Sparrman 2018a). In these situations, age is often used to protect children *from* culture until they reach a certain age, even, it turns out, if children might be performing in the production (Helander 2018). The idea of protecting children against culture, and we are not only talking about consumer culture, draws on a behaviouristic theory of children's cognitive maturation through developmental stages (Helander 2018; Sparrman 2018a). Today, critique has been levelled against this behaviouristic approach as being too inflexible. Still, age is, just like gender, a fundamental device for segmenting markets. That consumer objects are "aged" by the market does not, as this book illustrates, mean that children, young people, or adults use them accordingly in practice.

Age is a social, cultural, and material relation. There is what we, drawing on Blackshaw (2010), could call an "age liquidity" as people do not express cultural age loyalty. You can be 2 or 99 years old and visit and enjoy the same rock concert or meet across ages through digital gaming activities or social media. This accessibility thus cuts across generational orders.

The pleasure of culture

Reading across the chapters of this book, it is obvious that children's and young people's cultural engagements are bundled not just with age, but also with pleasure in multiple ways. Children and young people express delight in gaming skills, show playfulness, enjoy winning, use their desires as creative forces, show content, enjoy fancifulness, and express passion; they plainly enjoy themselves. What do these emotions tell us about children's and young people's leisure cultures?

It has already been mentioned that child and youth culture as well as notions of "the child" and "the youth" are embedded in systems of social and cultural norms and values. Other values intertwining with child culture come from the field of education. It is more or less a standard that child culture gets its value through educational goals, or through solving larger societal and cultural problems like school bullying (Sparrman 2011).

Culture can of course have importance for dealing with challenging social problems like bullying. One of the chapters in this book, for example, emphasises how music can be an important tool for processing strong emotions of loss (Vestad this volume). Fear, anger, threats, and abandonment are often also central in cultural productions addressing children and young people (Helander 2018). A question this book raises is whether pleasure, enjoyment, and the sublime can be equally important to our understanding of children's and young people's cultural practices as, for example, learning outcomes.

As pointed out by Sara Ahmed (2004), the language of emotions generally leans on the presumption of interiority rather than being described as a social and cultural practice that binds together and organises societies. Ahmed has developed what she calls the "outside in" model emphasising emotions capacities to bring people and societies together (Ahmed 2004, p. 9). Drawing on Ahmed this book explore how leisure culture is a mix of social relations, materiality, age, and emotions and that emotions, just like any other aspect, politicise leisure culture. For example, which emotions are allowed, and which are not? Is it morally acceptable to emotionally invest in being a "fan" (Buhl; Duggan this volume), to enjoy winning a drawing competition (Hrechaniuk this volume), or to be dismayed that your native language is not available on Facebook (Ní Bhroin; Montgomery-Andersen this volume).

Karin Helander (2018) discusses how emotions are, and have been, a recurring topic when the Swedish Media Council decides on the age limit for films targeting children and young people.[4] Possible emotions are then valued against the content of the film. This politicises what children and young people are presumed to be able to cope with emotionally (entangled with age!) or which emotions are acceptable from a political point of view. The Media Council, it seems, can in this way decide in advance the inner emotional processes a film can trigger and then decide against this emotion by classifying and hierarchising it in relation to other emotions as too strong, too scary, and/or too emotional. These rules or restrictions do not come from nothing; they come from ideas of what is emotionally appropriate or not for children and young people, as well as from which emotions are seen to be appropriate for these age groups. The Media Council's politics draws on an interior, individualistic and fractioned idea of emotions, rather than seeing emotions as Ahmed, as something that binds people together, even if the emotions are grim.

More than one of the chapters in this book approach emotions from the "outside in" (Ahmed 2004) showing that children's and young people's emotions are part of larger social and cultural systems (Gustafsson this volume) or by rules set up in relation to using cultural expressions like social or digital media (Arminen & Tiillikainen; Johansen; Merikivi et al. this volume). As two of the book chapters point out, pleasure and enjoyment can also have an impact on other life choices, like how the young woman Signe's engagement in cosplay leads her to enrol for a design course and a bachelor programme in Japanese Studies (Buhl this volume), and how hip-hop becomes a source for future economic provision and lifestyles (Söderman this volume). Pleasure and freedom have potentials in the hands of children and young people even when they explore culture without measuring it against learning outcomes.

Ahmed's (2004) "outside in" of emotions makes it possible to explore the complex and interesting emotional world of the everyday life of leisure culture without discarding or marginalising it. Instead, it facilitates (politically) raising the value of the emotive parts of not just culture, but of life in general.

Looking ahead

This research anthology is a determined effort to show what children and young people do in their own cultural leisure practices. By doing this, the book brings an awareness to what children and young people across the Nordic countries engage with. The collection of chapters gives a broad, vivid, and exciting insight to how

[4] *"The Swedish Media Council [Statens Medieråd] is a government agency whose primary task is to promote the empowering of minors as conscious media users and to protect them from harmful media influences. /.../ The Council also classifies films for public screening. The ratings reflect whether the films are liable to harm the well-being of children. The age ratings are 'all ages', 7, 11 and 'not rated', the latter resulting in a 15 rating." (Swedish Media Council 2019).*

children and young people make culture matter in their own and others' lives. The empirical examples in the book do not perform a special Nordic leisure culture, but rather they show that, depending on in which country, or where within in a country, you live, access to culture really differs.

What the Nordic children and young people share are the pleasure, the enjoyment, the struggle, and the responsibility of making use of the freedom they have in forming their leisure time. And they do! Yes, they do, but they are also circumscribed by norms and values linked to children, childhood, youth, culture, adulthood, age, emotions, and politics.

Children's and young people's own leisure cultures have a complicated position. The Swedish National Cultural Policy (2009), for example, emphasises children's and young people's right to culture by singling them out as a prioritised target group in relation to national cultural policy objectives (Swedish Arts Council 2019). All Nordic countries have also signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, United Nations 2019). One of the fundamental aspects of these rights is access to and participation in leisure culture (Article 31). Still, to single out children and young people in national and international policies also risks marginalising and isolating them as a group (Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie & Vandevelde 2012).

Sometimes groups need to be singled out to become visible at all, and this is often the case for children and young people (Sparrman 2011). However, when after having done that we also need to reinstate them within the system again, and most importantly at a different position than they had before. Even though children and young people are singled out politically, their own leisure cultures are not necessarily per definition valued as important by public cultural politics. As pointed out in this introduction, child and youth culture often obtains its value through education. This said, there are important interconnections between culture, education, and learning.

The Swedish National Cultural Policy (2009), for example, finances cultural school projects to make sure cultural expressions and participation reach and involve *all* Swedish children.[5] We do not want to give way on that. This book wants to reinstate children and young people, and we mean ALL children and young people, at the centre of cultural policies, not at its margins, thus making their leisure cultures relevant for every one of us as they show us how to live in and through culture.

Just as research in youth culture has often been occupied with the subversions of youth, so has research on leisure for a long time singled out and focused on (young)

[5] *For one such project, see Skapande skola [The creative school] https://www.kulturradet.se//Skapande-skola/, accessed 22/05/2019.*

white abled men (Henderson 2013). This gives a quite one-sided understanding of leisure cultures. By including ALL children and youth and what they do in practice, this book presents us not just with complexity across different activities, but it also opens for an awareness of the complex, multiple, and thoughtful ways in which leisure culture is carried out by young people themselves.

The collections of chapters also show that there are benefits of bringing child and youth culture together in the same book because the practices of leisure culture accentuate that child and youth culture are bundled together through co-creation of culture across ages and generations and that they help and support one another making culture relevant to life, and similarly life relevant to culture. Even though this is the case, it is difficult to foresee that age will become a non-category in how children's and young people's cultural lives are organized politically. What would age be replaced by?

Finally, and maybe most importantly, this anthology demonstrates that pleasures and emotions are important to children and young people. In the future, we should explore not just what children and young people *do* in their leisure time, but acknowledge how children and young people *feel*, and what parts of their lives their leisure culture activities fulfil. In this way we can start to advance the question why. Why do children and young people do what they do, and what do they invest in these whys?

Acknowledgement

The authors of this book would like to express a collective thanks to all the participants whose experiences have contributed to the research in this book.

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