

How exclusion from the public and private realm can negatively effect adolescents' sense of community belonging

C. Barron

School of Nursing, Psychotherapy and Community Health, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Objectives: This paper discusses the issue of adolescent exclusion from the public (playgrounds, beaches, roads) and private realm (homes) and its link to their sense of community belonging, identity, and mental health.

Methods: This research project employed a rights-based approach, and such a methodology focuses on research *with*, rather than research *about*, children and adolescents. In line with this philosophy, a wide range of qualitative participatory methodologies were employed with children and adolescents. In total, 411 children and adolescents (3–17 years) took part in consultation workshops across the county.

Results: From the age of 11 onwards, children report a sense of 'not belonging' to recognised 'children's places' such as playgrounds. Young adolescents report being actively excluded from public and private spaces. The effects of this exclusion are examined in relation to their sense of belonging, identity, and well-being.

Conclusions: Exclusionary practices appear to be increasing and impacting on younger children in both private and public spaces. This forced exclusion of children and adolescents from the public and private realm challenges their sense of belonging or connectedness which is associated with low self-esteem, high levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. A more inclusive, rights-based approach should be employed in all aspects of public realm design that actively seeks and incorporates the views of children and adolescents as well as the more dominant voice of the adult.

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Introduction

Children and adolescents live their day to day lives in public and private realms, both of which are socially constructed concepts. Public space can be viewed as places accessible to all citizens for their use (e.g. playgrounds, public parks, roads, beaches). In contrast, a private place is one that has restricted access and is only open to those permitted by law or custom (e.g. the home). The current practice of excluding children and adolescents from the private and public realm is not new. Urban historian Sanford Gaster described the restriction of children's recreation within one neighbourhood in New York City (Gaster, 1991). He found that, in the generations between 1915 and 1975, children used constantly decreasing numbers of places within the neighbourhood, met growing numbers of physical barriers to place use, experienced more direct control of places they might use, and participated more frequently in paid supervised activities. Similar findings have been repeated internationally (Kohn, 2004; Low, 2006;

Muñoz, 2009) including Ireland (Kilkelly, 2015; Barron, 2020). With these changes, the role of local county and city councils in regulating space assumes an enhanced significance, as they have the primary responsibility for the development and planning processes relating to public and community spaces.

In relation to exclusion from private or semi-private spaces such as shopping centres, cafes, etc, Crane's (2000) work in Brisbane indicates that the exclusion of adolescents is often justified in terms of health and safety, public liability, or duty of care obligations. It most frequently occurs as a response to behaviour that is seen as 'anti-social', or simply involves adolescents' 'hanging around', as opposed to any illegal activity. France & Wiles (1998) argue that as more public access facilities are provided in private spaces (commercial play and leisure areas), fewer and poorer quality facilities are available in the public realm, with the result that 'problematic' populations such as adolescents' become concentrated and controlled by increasingly assertive policing. This 'policing' or 'patrolling' has in many locations been privatised with commercial entities such as shopping centres employing their own or contracted security guards to protect property and those seen as customers.

Address for correspondence: Dr Carol Barron, School of Nursing, Psychotherapy and Community Health, Dublin City University, Ireland. (Email: carol.barron@dcu.ie)

Other policing strategies in the public realm which have become increasingly popular include crime and vandalism reduction measures such as CCTV surveillance of playgrounds, skate parks, and sports grounds. The monitoring of children and adolescents via technological devices has become a characteristic of modern childhood (Qvortrup, 1993; Rasmussen, 2004; Rooney, 2010; Barron, 2014), the effects of which are as yet unknown. Moreover, there is increasing reliance on policies that restrict access to certain spaces (e.g. age restrictions for playground equipment, no ball games in designated areas, no walking on the grass, and so forth). According to Crane (2000), 'exclusion' in the context of public and community space occurs when people are denied or lack the means for full access to the spaces that are venues for experiencing social and cultural life. Yet, despite this active exclusion of children and adolescents from the public realm, O'Neill (2002), amongst many others, highlights issues of marginalization and the importance of enhancing adolescents' access to public spaces. With reference to the United States context, she argues that young, poor, urban, youth are more likely to use public spaces for leisure activities because they do not have access to many private spaces. O'Neill also suggests that attempts to limit adolescents access to public space may have a detrimental effect because '*Public spaces provide the possibility for adolescents' to rehearse, re-develop, and affirm identities and communities of their own'* (O'Neill, 2002, p. 65). It is partly within the public realm that children and adolescents develop and re-affirm their identities as friends, neighbours, members of specific communities, and their social connectedness.

Play, leisure, and recreation

Belonging and connectedness develop in part during children and adolescents outdoor play and recreational activities. Play and recreation does not occur in a vacuum, it happens 'somewhere' in both a physical, social, and cultural context. The WHO (2017) supports the provision of spaces where adolescents can meet in safety (Baldwin, 2011) and socialise with their peers, a significant adolescent activity. All children and adolescents have the right to play and recreation. This has been enshrined for over thirty years in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31).

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 (UNCRC, 1989)

Article 31 is highly significant as it is the first time that the international communities recognized the importance of play and recreation in the lives of children

and adolescents. Note the importance of play as a vehicle to enhance learning, child development, social skills, increasing physical activity, and so forth, but purely the importance of play and recreation *in and of itself*, in the here and now, without identifying specific purposes or functions to the act of 'playing'. Within the public realm, play spaces, such as playgrounds, are what Rasmussen (2004) terms 'spaces for children'; that is, adult designated and designed spaces for the use of children and adolescents' according to the adults' perception of the children's spatial desires and needs. Historically, there was recognition that public and private spaces were designed to reflect only adult values and usage. However, recent decades have shown a significant interest in children and adolescents' share in ownership and decision making regarding public spaces, but this is still a contested field (Freeman & Tranter, 2011). Today, 'place making' has become a dominant maxim in culture-led urban planning and is particularly focused towards children and adolescents, the future beneficiaries of regeneration (Plonter & Jones, 2019).

This paper focus on adolescents growing up in a 'commuter belt' county in Ireland which has the second youngest population in the country. The last two decades have seen this county experience one of the fastest growing populations in the country. There were 69 039 children and adolescents (0–19 years) in the 2016 census, an increase of 4253 children in the intercensal period. Children between the ages of 0 and 14 years account for 36.5% of the county's population, and adolescents (12–18 years) comprise 16.7% of the county's population compared to the national average of 7.7%.

Methods

Full ethical approval was sought and received prior to this research commencing. The research methodology employed in this project is based on a rights-based approach and such a methodology focuses on research *with*, rather than research *about*, children and adolescents. Article 12 of the UNCRC in particular is important in relation to children's right to have their voices heard about matters that concern them:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989).

In line with this approach, the project used a range of qualitative participatory methodologies to elicit first-hand data from children and adolescents, about their experiences, perspectives, and needs in relation to play

and recreation. The use of participatory methodologies with children and adolescents has been foregrounded as the key to unlocking their potential to contribute rich and useful perspectives to inform research into their lives (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013). For the sake of clarity, and being aware of the contested definitions surrounding 'childhood' and 'adolescent in academic and public discourses, in this article, the author employs the term 'children' for 3–10-year-olds and the term 'adolescent' for 11–18-year-olds who are the focus of this paper.

Convenience sampling was undertaken across the five municipal districts in the county. Twenty-three consultation workshops, lasting approximately 60–90 minutes in duration, were held. All workshops took place in a variety of settings Crèche (4); preschool (1); after school setting (4); primary school (6); secondary school/community college (7); and one consultation session with the county, Comhairle na nÓg [youth council]. Five of the workshops were in rural settings and eighteen in urban settings which is reflective of the 70% urban and 30% rural population distribution in the county. In total, 411 (200 boys:girls 211) children and adolescents took part in consultation workshops. Two hundred and three adolescents (boys 93:110 girls) aged between 11 and 17 years.

Several differing mapping techniques have been used very effectively to access information from children and adolescents about their environmental perception. Older children (12 years plus) may not enjoy the activity of drawing (Sobel, 1998; Travlou *et al.* 2008). From the age of 11 years onwards, children can read and use maps to orientate themselves to a wider environment than their local neighbourhood (Nordstrom, 2003). Consequently, large Ordinance Survey Maps (OSI) of the local areas in which the adolescents lived were used. These maps have the potential to provide information about much more than simply locating places in space; it is about adolescents moving through the landscape (Travlou *et al.* 2008). Adolescents were divided into small groups of 4–6 at separate tables within the classroom setting and given a large OSI map of their local area/town/village and black markers. They were asked to 'map' their routes, spaces, and places they used for play and recreation. This exercise proved highly popular with the adolescents and generated a lot of discussion identifying barriers and enablers to their recreation. Totally, 176 adolescents took part in this exercise (boys 77:99 girls). Fifty-four of the children were aged between 12 and 14 years (boys 20:34 girls) and 122 adolescents aged between 15 and 17 years (boys 57:65 girls).

The second exercise was the 'Wheel exercise'. Adolescents were again divided into small groups of 4–6 at separate tables within the classroom setting. The researcher introduced the concept of 'the wheel'

in which a large multi-coloured circle was divided into quarters, with one question per quarter. This is similar to the wheel exercise used by O'Connell *et al.* (2015). The four questions were as follows:

- Where I like to hang out and why?
- Where I don't like to hang out and why?
- What I would like to change about recreation in my area?
- Important things for the council to know about hanging out and recreation in my area.

The adolescents were given an A5 sized sheet of paper per question (4 in total) with markers and one segment of the 'wheel' at a time and asked to discuss the questions in their group and write down the main points of their group's discussion. Towards the end of the exercise, the students were brought together as one large group and asked to select 'The top 3' issues that they felt were the most important for the council to know about play and recreation for adolescents' across the county from all of their feedback. This section of the exercise was challenging for some adolescents in reaching a consensus; however, all groups did reach this point. This exercise was very popular and generated significant discussion. The data generated from the wheel questions were imported into Excel and analysed using content analysis which is a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. The discussions generated by each group were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data that is independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches.

Results

'Not belonging anymore'

What was very evident within the children's discussions was the feeling that they no longer 'belong' or are accepted in places they have traditionally played in whilst growing up in this commuter belt county.

When I go to [Named playground], I sometimes get dirty looks because most of the equipment is for younger kids (Girl 11 Years)

From the age of 11 onwards, children reported feeling unwelcome and unwanted in playgrounds based on their beliefs that playground equipment is predominantly for 'younger children' than themselves and that adults (parents) no longer accept their presence in playgrounds as they are 'too old'. This finding was repeated

consistently and, in more depth by the adolescents' *'I feel bad that younger kids don't like to go there [Playground] because we are there, plus parents don't feel comfortable with us there'*. (Girl 13 Years). Adolescents are aware that adults do not welcome them in traditional spaces that they used for play and recreation purposes when they were younger. Whilst there are some recreational resources specifically for adolescents, there is still a perception amongst the adolescents that their play and recreational needs are not catered for in the way that adults are, as the following quote explains; *'Why do adults get a nightclub and we don't get a hangout area?'* (Boy 13 Years) and the elderly; *'There's more elderly places than places for us teenagers'* (Girl 14 Years). This expressed desire for 'a place' to belong to, and for adolescents only, is expanded on by one girl who tells us the functions of this desired place; *'A place for teenagers to hang out with their friends and talk, somewhere dry, warm, indoors, affordable refreshments and WiFi'* (Girl 17 Years). All adolescents proposed 'a place' as encompassing both a physical/built environment at the neighbourhood/community level and the subjective feelings its inhabitants would hold towards each other as a group of people who belong to the neighbourhood and the local community.

'Kicked out and moved on'

A theme repeated by all groups of adolescents', in all workshops, in all municipalities was the belief that they were 'not welcome' in certain semi-private and public spaces

'Stop getting kicked out of shops' (Boy 13 Years)

'To stop getting moved on from public places for no good reason'. (Girl 15 Years)

'There is no place for teens to hang out and we get kicked out of any places we go' (Boy 14 Years)

'Not being kicked out of places' (named shopping centre) (Girl 16 Years)

Adolescents repeatedly gave examples of being 'kicked out' of semi-private spaces such as shopping centres, restaurants, and cafes. There are tensions between different users of private spaces and the ways in which the dominant members of society (in particular, adults) often consider the presence of certain marginalized groups within these spaces to be problematical. In this case, adolescents, individually or collectively, constitute one such marginalized group. Adolescents feel and expressed a strong sense of exclusion from semi-private spaces by virtue of simply being 'a young person'. This perception of

exclusion and being unwelcome also influences the spaces and places they do occupy; in other words, adolescents will occupy public and private spaces where they are not 'kicked out' as opposed to using these same spaces out of preference as evident in the examples below:

[Named Park] – cant kick you out (Girl 11 Years)

[Named shop] – 'they don't kick you out and there are benches' (Boy 17 Years)

'Abandoned factory – don't get kicked out' (Girl 14 Years)

Adolescents are among the most frequent users of public spaces such as paths, parks, and semi-private spaces such as shopping centres, yet a range of exclusionary strategies were being employed in most of the municipalities across the county, these included; a shopping centre with an agreement from the local secondary school to not allow their students access during school hours; 'blocking' of WiFi signal to discourage adolescents congregating in a particular area; in another shopping centre, adolescents were being asked to leave purely on the grounds of belonging to the Traveller community. In the last two decades, numerous studies suggest that adolescents as a group are excluded from or, not welcomed in, much of the public and private realm (Travlou *et al.* 2008). A very limited way that adolescents can attempt to overcome this exclusion from the private realm is with money. Adolescents were very aware of their own limited financial resources and described having to purchase goods such as food and coffee in order to access private spaces which they resented. *'[Named Shopping Centre] – kicked out unless buying stuff'* (Boy 16 Years). Even when adolescents paid for goods, this did not guarantee their ability to stay in a preferred place *[Named coffee shop] – they remove young people from the premises even after you purchase something, so its really hard to meet up with your friends'* (Girl 15 Years)

There was strong repetition in the specific types of private and semi-private spaces that adolescents were 'kicked out' of and the focus from the adolescents' perspective is on cafes, shops, shopping centres, and restaurants as summed up succinctly in the following quote; *'We don't like going to restaurants, cafes or shops because we are constantly told to leave and get moved on'* (Boy 17 Years). One of the many reasons that adolescents wish to visit these specific places, apart from fact that they are sheltered, and they can socialise with their peers is Wi-Fi access. The availability or unavailability of Wi-Fi access was deemed as central to adolescents' recreational needs. In one municipality where there is no shopping centre, the adolescents congregate within the public

space of 'the square' as they can get free Wi-Fi access from the surrounding buildings.

Discussion

Much has been written about the construct of social connectedness from researchers of adolescent health and development following Resnick *et al.*'s (1997) seminal paper. The key social domains of connectedness used to study these outcomes are family, school, peers, and community. This paper focus on the domain of connectedness in relation to the community. Whilst connectedness itself may be viewed differently by researchers, there is general consensus that a sense of belonging or connectedness is a basic psychological need, which brings about positive outcomes when it is met (Jose *et al.* 2012). Baumeister & Leary (1995) argued that belonging is a fundamental motivation, essentially vital for well-being and operates in a broad variety of settings such as the community. McCallum & McLaren (2010) are more specific and tell us that a sense of belonging is a requirement for psychological well-being. Belonging to a community is also linked to the construction of identity. Schaefer-McDaniel (2004) suggests that a 'sense of belonging' establishes an important part of the conceptual framework of youths social capital and that '*Community is constructed, articulated, represented and imagined in numerous ways, each of which has implications for the formation of participants' identities and social capital*' (pg 161). Social capital research focusing on children is relatively new (Karsten, 2011). Children and adolescents were not historically viewed as having an active role in building their own social networks; however, the importance of peers and friendship groups within adolescence is well known. Neighbourhoods and local communities are pivotal environments for the development of social capital, social networks, and a sense of belonging for children and adolescents. Low sense of belonging has also been associated with low self-esteem, increased levels of anxiety (Lee & Robbins, 1998), depression, and suicidal ideation (Bailey & McLaren, 2005).

Since the seminal work of Hart (1979), there have been numerous studies examining children and adolescents' experiences and perceptions of their neighbourhoods (see Matthews *et al.*'s 2000; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Morrow, 2001). Each of these studies explains how children and adolescents create a sense of belonging and well-being through their unsupervised play and recreation in neighbourhood spaces. However, it is also critically important to consider adult attitudes to children and adolescents' occupancy of public spaces such as children's playgrounds, parks and within the private and semi-private realm; shopping centres, cafes, and so forth, and its effects on their

developing sense of belonging, identity, and well-being. Exclusionary practices appear to be increasing and impacting on chronologically younger children.

Over the past century and a half, there has been a gradual, long-term shift in the 'spaces of childhood,' from outdoors to indoors, from woods, fields, and streets to back and front gardens, bedrooms. and commercial and other formal play sites (Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Burke, 2005) and a decline in wholly unsupervised, free, unstructured play (Barron, 2014). There is a commonly held adult belief that children and adolescents today prefer indoor play and play with technology to outdoor play (Kerrins *et al.* 2011). However, this view is not supported when children and adolescents are asked directly about their play preferences (Lester & Maudsley, 2007). Overall, there is significant evidence over recent decades (Kerrins *et al.* 2011) to support the reality that children themselves prefer playing outdoors (Lester & Maudsley, 2007). The concept of the 'outdoors' includes public and private outside spaces, frequently incorporating some degree of the 'natural' in which adolescents' can engage with nature in man-made (urban greenspace such as domestic and communal gardens and urban parks) or less managed spaces such as open countryside, forest, and coastal and mountain areas (Pretty, 2007; Muñoz, 2009).

Within the public realm, playgrounds are a traditional space for children's play and recreation. Playgrounds become a 'place for children' where, over time, they gradually experienced the playground setting and come to know it through lived experiences and then attribute certain meanings and emotions in it. As Tuan (1977) famously pointed out '*Abstract knowledge about a place can be acquired in short order if one is diligent... But the 'feel' of a place takes longer to acquire*' (p. 183). Children spend years playing and socialising with peers within playground settings where they feel they belong, a basic psychological need, which brings about positive outcomes (McCallum & McLaren, 2010; Jose *et al.* 2012). However, by virtue of their chronological age or physical size, adolescents as young as 11 years of age are becoming very conscious of becoming 'unwelcome' and 'not belonging' in this place any more in the view of adults, especially the parents of younger children who visit the playground. They are made to feel unwelcome in a place they have strong attachments and a significant site for socialising with peers. This forced exclusion challenges their sense of belonging or connectedness which is associated with low self-esteem, high levels of anxiety (Lee & Robbins, 1998), depression, and suicidal ideation (Bailey & McLaren, 2005). Cuba & Hummon (1993) describe emotional ties and affiliation with place as aspects of identity. These children may be viewed as 'too old' or 'too big' by adults to be in the playground, yet at 11 years of age, they are 'betwixt and between' in

a liminal space (van Genneep, 1960; Turner, 1964) of confusing identify and sense of belonging. The impact of this is unclear on their identify formation.

The private realm is an important context where adolescents' identity development can be supported from a sociocultural perspective. Shopping centres have been frequently criticised in the academic literature, accused of fostering the privatisation of public space (Kohn, 2004; Low, 2006). Chiodellia & Moronib (2015), however, refute this claim, arguing that shopping centres probably have one of the highest levels of openness among all private spaces. Nevertheless, shopping centres appear to be a key site for the exclusion of adolescents in Ireland, we view the shopping centre as a semi-public space, a very significant site for adolescent socialisation and leisure. Adolescents' frustration with methods of exclusion from the private landscape was clear. This impacts significantly on their ability to 'just be' an active user of their own neighbourhoods and communities. The strategies available to overcome these exclusionary practices are not available to all adolescents such as cash to buy 'food and coffee' thus legitimise their presence in coffee shops. This author suggests that a more inclusive practice should be employed in all aspects of public realm design and that planning for the public realm incorporate the views of children and adolescents who use it as well as the more dominant voice of the adult.

In an Irish context, children have reported their preference for outdoor play and recreation with peers or friends and indoor play in the absence of friends and peers (Downey *et al.* 2007). We know that outdoor play is highly linked to the presence of friends nearby (Kilkelly, 2015; Barron *et al.* 2017). The opportunity for outdoor play and recreation is viewed as a normal part of a 'proper childhood' (Hendrick, 1997; Layard & Dunn, 2009) and beneficial for children's development and well-being (Gill, 2014; Brussoni *et al.* 2015) with recreation or leisure being acknowledged as an important field for adolescents' personal development (Larson & Verma, 1999; Larson, 2000). Moreover, Grey (2011) argues that over the last 60 years, measures of psychopathology in children and adolescents – including indices of anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, and narcissism – have continually increased, at the same time as we have seen declining opportunities for outdoor play. He argues for a causal link between the decline in play and increase in psychopathology arguing that play serves a variety of developmental functions, all of which promote children's mental health. Part of this decline in opportunities for outdoor play is due to exclusion and exclusionary practices upon Irish adolescents.

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Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethical standards

The author asserts that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committee on human experimentation with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008. The author asserts that ethical approval for publication of this research has been provided by Dublin City University.

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