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## **Rainbows, teddy bears and ‘others’: The cultural politics of children’s leisure amidst the COVID-19 pandemic**

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In countries currently under lockdown, schools and leisure facilities have closed their gates to the vast majority of children. Having to stay indoors for most of the day, children’s leiscapes have been radically transformed. In these circumstances, instances have emerged from across the globe of children adapting to the lockdown in creative ways and constructing leiscapes within the limits of the home, by putting up rainbows and teddy bears on windows and porches. Drawing upon media reports about children’s rainbow drawings and teddy bear hunts, in this paper, I deploy a sociological lens to demonstrate how children are using these leisure narratives as tools for participating in the wider conversation around the pandemic. At the same time, however, in pinning romanticized notions of hope and ‘national spirit’ upon the normative image of the child at play, media narratives are obfuscating the inequalities that fracture lived childhoods in the developed world.

Keywords: coronavirus; COVID-19; children’s leisure; sociology of childhood, children’s participation.

### **Introduction: Children’s leisure in the time of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in more than half of the world’s population being asked by governments to stay at home and practice ‘social distancing’ measures in an effort to curb the spread of the pestilence. These so-called social distancing measures signify acts of *physical* distancing which in turn have reconfigured the *social* in fundamental ways. With lockdowns underway, schools, leisure centers and recreation facilities have closed their doors to the vast majority of children. These emergency measures have reassembled children’s everyday geographies – reshaping the social

institutions, processes, and relationships in which their daily lives are embedded. However, amidst these disruptions and uncertainties, instances have emerged from across the globe of children adapting to the lockdown in creative ways and crafting their narratives of leisure within the limits of the home, using resources available to them. Italy, which is amongst the worst affected countries, has seen children make drawings of rainbows inscribed with the slogan ‘andrà tutto bene’ (everything will be all right) and display them on windowpanes since the pandemic forced the country into lockdown at the beginning of March (Otte, 2020). In the United Kingdom too, children have been drawing rainbows – often featuring thank you notes for the National Health Service (NHS) – and putting them up on street-facing windows and outside their homes (Freshwater, 2020). In a similar vein, lockdown ‘teddy bear hunts’ have become extremely popular in New Zealand (NZ) wherein children are displaying teddy bears on their front windows and pinning their location onto the ‘NZ Bear Hunt’ website – enabling other children to ‘hunt’ the bears from afar as they go out for their government mandated daily exercise in the local area with their parents (Roy, 2020). This window ‘bear hunt’ has since spread to the United States (Alexander, 2020), Canada (Desai, 2020), Australia (Alba, 2020), the Netherlands (Salm, 2020) and Belgium (Johnston, 2020) among other countries. Whilst familiar leisure spaces are out of bounds, these emergent leisure narratives produced by children can offer us a fresh ingress into the conceptualization of children’s leisure cultures and illustrate how they have been reshaped by the COVID-19 outbreak. Pulling together media reports on the construction of lockdown leiscapes by children, in this critical commentary I deploy the sociological lens of children’s participation to unpack the implications of these emergent leisure narratives and to reflect upon the ways in which they have been framed by the media. In particular, I will draw upon reports about children’s drawings

in the UK and children's teddy bear hunts in New Zealand to unravel the cultural politics of children's leisure under the current lockdown. I further demonstrate that the frames news-media outlets have brought to bear on these leisure activities of children offer important insights into how ideals of childhood and that of children's leisure are being socially constructed and circulated amidst the pandemic. I will begin by sketching the theoretical framework for understanding children's participation before looking into the UK and New Zealand cases in further details.

### **Children's everyday participation: A sociological lens**

In unpacking and analyzing these leisure narratives of children, I embrace the critical framework offered by the 'new' sociology of childhood which departs significantly from developmental psychology. Whilst the psy-sciences conceive of childhood as a universal biological category that undergoes a linear development across fixed stages, the 'new' sociology of childhood draws upon historical and across-cultural accounts to argue that ideas as well as lived experiences of childhood vary across time and place (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). This sociological framework understands childhood as an unequal space where generational divides intersect with classed, gendered and racial inequalities to produce a multiplicity of lived childhood within any given time-space (Wells, 2017). Children, in this view, are agentic social actors in the here and now who are shaped by and who in turn contribute to the social milieu they inhabit (Mayall, 2002). Issues of power are therefore central to this sociological understanding of children's lives in terms of how structural inequalities shape children's life chances, how children's subjectivities are produced and how children from their historically constituted social location engage with social institutions and processes.

The theoretical lens of children's participation, anchored within this broader sociological framework of childhood studies, can put into perspective the leisure

narratives of children outlined above. This idea of children's participation, which is closely linked to children's agency, has been framed in two main ways. One set of scholars have looked into institutionalized and normative modes of children's participation which take as its point of departure formal provisions made by adults that involve children in decision-making processes. This encompasses instances such as student councils in schools, which largely maintain status-quo while incorporating the voices of some children (Savyasaachi & Butler, 2014). In contrast, there is another body of scholarship which takes a more holistic view of participation by unmooring it from the narrow emphasis on institutional mechanisms and grounding it instead in children's everyday life, social-material encounters and relationships (Wyness, 2018). This view directs our attention to *children's spaces* where childhoods are lived out and which are environments of many possibilities shaped by children's encounters with adults and other children (Moss & Petrie, 2002). These 'children's spaces' mark the realm for the construction of non-predictable futures. In this sense, children's participation offers a window into understanding children as political actors either in terms of the issues and structures they engage with or in terms of the micropolitics of their inter-generational (child-adult) and intra-generational (child-child) relations.

### **Rainbows, teddy bears and leisure**

In countries currently under lockdown, schools have closed their gates to the vast majority of children and other facilities that school-age children attend are closed too. Confined largely to their homes with no access to peer groups and leisure centers, children's physical leisurescapes have been transformed. At home, children's education, family time and leisure are intertwined like never before with digital leisure assuming greater importance. However, amidst these changes, children in several countries are co-creating leisure narratives that are responding directly to this lockdown.

News media outlets in the UK have widely reported the growing phenomenon of children's hand-drawn rainbows which are appearing on windowpanes across the country. This trend started in Italy – the first country in Europe to go into lockdown – where children drew rainbows often inscribed with the message ‘andrà tutto bene’ (everything will be all right) and put them on windows and balconies for others to see (Otte, 2020). UK children are writing ‘Thank You NHS’ on their rainbow drawings – expressing gratitude for the tireless work being done by healthcare workers of the National Health Service (NHS) which is a publicly-funded healthcare system that is free to people at the point of use. These leisure narratives that children are crafting through their acts of drawing and displaying their rainbows on front windows are not only visible to people on the street, it has attracted significant media attention with TV channels and newspapers actively asking children to send in pictures and videos of their rainbows (BBC, 2020). On Twitter, these pictures and videos are being tagged with the hashtag #chasetherainbow - indicating both the illusionary chase after the rainbow as well as turning the trend itself into a virtual adventure under lockdown. The ‘thank you’ messages for the NHS and the bright colors of the rainbow are increasingly being portrayed in the media as harbingers of “hope” and “positivity” (Freshwater, 2020; Doherty, 2020) that are helping to “raise spirits of passers-by” (Dracott, 2020). Amidst this lockdown, Queen Elizabeth II delivered a rare televised broadcast where she reflected on how Britons have expressed their gratitude to key workers:

The moments when the United Kingdom has come together to applaud its care and essential workers will be remembered as an expression of our national spirit; and its symbol will be the rainbows drawn by children. (HM The Queen, 2020, para. 5)

Here the notions of childhood and nation are closely entangled, with the representation of the purported ‘national spirit’ being built upon ideals of childhood.

Indeed, the consolidation of the modern nation-state in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century coincided within the construction of the modern ideal of childhood that quarantined children from the adult-world, confining children to the realm of the family and the school and severing their erstwhile role as economic actors (Hendrick, 1997). Children located outside this ideal were seen as ‘out of place’ and therefore needed ‘rescuing’ by state agencies and philanthropists. These historical processes produced the frames within which romanticized notions of domesticated and scholarized childhood became ideal vehicles in whose name the nation came to act and craft policies. At the same time, children in many respects are ‘not citizens’, being bereft of such privileges such as voting rights and obligations such as financial responsibility (Cockburn, 2013).

The deficit model of children’s citizenship – which can be exploited as the basis of the nation – has no room for understanding the lives of actual children and their participation in wider debates. Aspects of children’s leisure encapsulated by the rainbow drawings take us beyond this individualized model of children-as-future-citizens to their *lived citizenship* in the here and now (Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018). These drawings straddle the new divisions erected by the lockdown, acting as the bridge between the home and the street, the private and the public, the lockdown and its future. Rather than framing children’s leisure narratives during this lockdown as replicable acts upon which notions of futurity can be projected, the materiality of these drawings constitute one of the many ways through which children are engaging with the wider social issue of this pandemic and symbolically participating in national conversations. These leisurescapes of children are embedded in an assemblage of humans and materials implicating parents, family members, drawing paraphernalia and the internet.

In New Zealand (NZ), Deb Hoffman founded the ‘teddy bear hunt’ on a Facebook page where she invited children to place a teddy bear on their windows and

mark their location by dropping a 'pin' on the NZ Bear Hunt website. This enabled children to spot bears in windows when they go out in their local areas with parents for their daily exercises – which is allowed under current lockdown rules. Although it was started by an adult, the bear hunt has not only gathered pace across the globe, it has been appropriated by children themselves. It has been reported that many children are changing the attire of their teddies every day and creating elaborate displays on their porches and gardens of bears fishing and playing in different formations (Roy, 2020). Inspired by the children's book *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen, this lockdown leisure phenomenon brings home the significance of internet-enabled global flows of ideas, affect and materials. Meanwhile two sisters in the US, aged 8 and 12, have started a Facebook group with the help of their parents through which others are sharing pictures of 'bear hunts' from across the country and further field (Fortin, 2020). The two sisters are putting pushpins on maps in their room to keep track of all the bear sightings reported on their group. The teddy bear which has been emblematic of American consumer culture has travelled places and its significance as a companion object within children's emotional geographies is well known. In the time of COVID-19, however, this teddy bear hunt has become a vehicle for children's participation and lived citizenship. Through these leisure narratives, children are making their presence felt and symbolically engaging in the public debate on the lockdown and its future.

Popular framing of children's COVID-19 leisurescapes as harbingers of hope and symbols of 'national spirit' conspicuously leaves out – and thereby *otherizes* – the leisure narratives and modes of participation of marginalized children who often lack material resources at their disposal. Their lived citizenship and agency might assume forms that are different from those of middle-class children, whose life experiences often get projected as ideal norms of childhood (Wells, 2017). In fact, within high-

income countries, one child in five lives in poverty (UNICEF, 2017) with limited access to permanent accommodation or the internet. Their leisure narratives during the lockdown is absent from available media accounts. With this lockdown adversely affecting the marginalized sections of society and unravelling the reaches of health inequalities, future leisure scholars should look carefully into children's participation through leisure across multiple social contexts. Indeed, critically unpacking the inequalities of childhood and that of children's leisure can help us re-assess the state of the nation and re-assemble an inclusive and socially just 'national spirit'.

## **Conclusion**

The leisure narratives children are constructing through rainbow drawings and teddy bears represent a small portion of their everyday lives and these are indeed geographically limited examples that I have discussed above. Nonetheless, they matter – to the children themselves and to their communities – and they offer a range of crucial insights into the cultural politics of children's leisure amidst this COVID-19 pandemic. The rainbow and the teddy bear are both readily available cultural texts that children and their parents are harnessing during this lockdown. The leisure spaces thus created are connected to the wider conversation around the pandemic while being embedded within a range of generational and material relations involving the child, their family members, their drawing kits, and other paraphernalia. These leisure narratives demonstrate that children's leisure cultures are never insulated from the adult world but are embedded in a range of social relationships of inter-dependence through which children (co)construct leisure and make it meaningful.

The distinction I made earlier between *physical* and *social* distancing bears repeating here for although children are keeping physical distance by staying at home,



they are weaving social intimacies through the material production and display of their rainbows and bear hunts. As evidenced by the media reports above, the conversation around these leisure activities have become vehicles for solidarity and social communication for many. However, in pinning romanticized notions of hope and ‘national spirit’ upon the normative image of the child at play, media narratives are obfuscating the extent of childhood poverty and inequality that inflect the lives – and leisure opportunities – of millions of children in the developed world.

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