



## Participatory planning and children's emotional labor in the production of urban nature



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### ABSTRACT

Children have increasingly been called upon to participate in the planning of their communities, especially in projects associated with urban nature and outdoor play spaces. Building upon the concept of emotional labor, we critically explore how children become enrolled in such initiatives. Specifically, we focus on the emotional geographies underlining children's participation, including the emotions children exhibit invest, experience and produce in these projects, as well as the ways these emotions are regulated, framed and used by urban managers and policy-makers in participatory planning activities. Our theoretical framework intersects research on emotional labor with recent geographic literature on children, urban governance, and emotions. We explore the idea of children's and young people's emotional labor through an analysis of a collaborative effort between local nonprofits, government agencies, youth organizations and research institutions aimed at addressing the lack of public green space in a disenfranchised urban community in California. The empirical evidence is drawn from a research project in which we engaged a group of 9–11 year old children in a variety of planning activities involving participatory mapping, use of visual media, and focus groups.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, children have become more frequently involved in urban planning initiatives. Local government agencies, community-based organizations and schools increasingly praise the value of consulting young people about projects which directly affect them, including public parks, transportation routes, food policies and recreation amenities. Getting young people involved in the decision-making process presumably increases the likelihood that they will actually use the proposed space or amenity, while increasing a sense of ownership and responsibility. This trend is a significant step in addressing what many researchers have deplored as an adultist approach to planning and place-making that ignores the agency and capacities of children to make decisions and assumes that parents, teachers and planners know better.

The need to empower children to shape their urban communities has become particularly relevant in a context where young people are viewed as increasingly disconnected from nature and

each other, with seemingly alarming consequences for their physical health and mental well-being (Louv, 2005, 2011). Yet, we are concerned about the ways children are enrolled in participatory and community-based planning efforts, particularly in the context of neoliberal urbanism. We fear that children's emotions are both devalued and commodified in a process that is highly regimented and shaped by uneven age, class and race relations. To better understand this process, we borrow arguments from the literature on emotional labor and build on recent work in emotional and children's geographies as well as critical research on participatory planning.

As a starting point, we share the views of geographers and other social scientists who today see emotions as cultural and social products often reproduced as embodied experiences (Mehta and Bondi, 1999). The development of a broad geographical agenda that is sensitive to the emotional and affective dimensions of everyday practices and social processes (Anderson and Smith, 2002; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Bosco, 2006; Curti et al., 2011) and the relationality between people and environments (Bondi, 2005; Thien, 2005) has recently been extended to the realm of children's geographies, where many have begun interrogating the role that emotions play in the constitution of the spatiality of children's social relations and experiences (Den Besten, 2010;

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Bartos, 2013; Murray and Mand, 2013; Wood, 2013). Along these lines, we agree that emotions are embedded into the particular practices and outcomes of projects aimed at or undertaken on behalf of children and young people—whether an after school program, a new playground, a set of policies, or something else (Harden, 2012).

Here, we want to expand the critical discussion of the ways in which children's emotional geographies matter in the context of a participatory and community-based planning process where children are being enrolled as active participants (Iltus and Hart, 1995; Barker, 2003; Knowles-Yanez, 2005). There is now a significant literature in human geography acknowledging the agency and capacity of children to be involved in formal and informal politics, including their participation in decisions that affect the quality of life (Matthews and Limb, 1999; Skelton and Valentine, 2003; Bosco, 2010). We acknowledge and agree with the many studies on participatory research that call for more children's participation in the planning process (see Pain, 2004 for a review), in particular to avoid the continued creation of children's places from an adult perspective (Malone, 1999) and to deal with the inherently unequal power relations in research involving children (Herman and Mattingly, 1999; Horton and Kraftl, 2006). However, we argue that there are problematic connections between participatory planning involving children and their emotions, especially in an institutional setting characterized by a hierarchical research environment and an urban landscape polarized by neoliberal governance. While participatory planning seeks to give voice to children's opinions, it also creates a process within which certain emotions are privileged while others are simultaneously devalued. This selective use of children's emotions reflects a lack of acknowledgment of both the emotional labor involved in planning activities and the emotional complexities of children's lives. As with other forms of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), the experiences and outcomes of encounters between children and actors appropriately described as "urban managers" (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Jones and Ward, 2002; Howell, 2008) are not well understood and need to be critically examined. Using the concept of emotional labor is useful to better understand the potential and pitfalls of participatory planning with children.

The evidence presented in this paper is based on our participation in a collaborative effort aimed at addressing the lack of public green space in a disenfranchised urban community in southern California characterized by a history of economic decline, lack of investment and political neglect. With funding from a planning grant, we worked with a small group of 9-to-11-year-old children in a variety of activities involving participatory mapping, use of visual media, and focus groups. These activities were coordinated in order to inform the work of a planning group tasked with proposing and designing an urban nature project that would be child-friendly and a source of community pride and cohesion in a neighborhood that is significantly poorer and more ethnically diverse than the rest of the metropolitan region that surrounds it.

Given its collaborative and community-based nature, the project involved many actors with diverging and potentially conflicting interests. The local branch of a national environmental conservation organization initiated the overall process after finding that a private foundation was offering competitive funding opportunities to plan, develop and build several urban nature spaces across the United States. The competition required that participants worked in multi-disciplinary teams that included nonprofit or community based organizations, landscape design professionals, architects, artists and academic researchers. From the beginning, a focus on children and youth was central to

the project. First, the environmental conservation organization joined forces with a local chapter of a national youth sport organization that provides after-school programs, classes and camps. The youth sports organization offered an ideal parcel of land for the future urban nature space. The site was adjacent to the youth organization's facilities and was traversed by a small creek where community cleanups had already been conducted. Second, the environmental conservation organization invited two world-renowned architects who had worked with children on various public art projects and facilities to join the team. Finally, we were invited to become part of the project as researchers with expertise on children's urban geographies and community spaces. We were tasked with conducting evidence-based research on nature and well-being in an urban area, and to identify replicable health-promoting design elements and practices as part of the project.

At our initial team meeting, we proposed making children and young people not only the target population (as future users of the urban nature space) but also key actors in the planning and design of the space itself. This excited all team members because there were clear synergies between our research interests, the goals of each community organization, and the expertise of the architects. In addition, the team believed that a focus on children and young people in connection with urban nature would give us an advantage in the national competition for funds. We suggested that children who already participated in activities at the youth organization facilities could make ideal candidates for involvement in the planning process because many of them were residents of the neighborhood and had a potential stake in the creation of a space that they could use in the future. Leaders of the youth sport organization also invited a group of adult community members to provide feedback and ideas as the planning process got underway—we were not part of those activities or of the selection process. The entire planning stage to develop a detailed proposal for the urban nature space lasted about a year and a half, but most of the participatory activities with children that we describe in this article took place over a few months during the spring of 2013.

The diversity of interests among the different actors involved provides a useful context to study how children's emotions are given value in selective and contradictory ways through participatory planning and research efforts. We argue that, by rewarding certain emotions, the project in which we participated supported, despite our efforts and intentions, a narrow understanding of childhood, which empowered children who embodied this dominant idea but marginalized those with different or unexpected emotional responses to the activities undertaken. We show how children's emotions were interpreted and strategically framed by certain adult members of our planning team to fulfill particular tasks and negotiate planning goals. This involved a limited consideration of the emotional lives of children outside of the project arena, as well as efforts to regulate (and ignore) children's embodied emotions during the planning process. The regulation of children's emotions was also projected into the future, particularly through certain design components in the final plan for the urban nature space that were clearly aimed at disciplining children and young people. Unfortunately, as we explain later in the article, the disconnect between what children desired and expressed and what was interpreted, recorded and used by urban managers led to an emotionally estranged final design for the urban-nature space—something that was to be tagged on to the already alienated urban fabric of the neighborhood. The remainder of this article develops our argument, and provides an account of our experiences before, during and after the planning process.

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