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## **Making places? Children's use and control of bedroom space**

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### **Abstract**

Bedroom space has been relatively under-researched in Children's Geographies and Childhood Studies. This chapter draws together a collection of literature from a range of disciplines which has examined aspects of how children (aged 0-18years) use and control bedroom space. The examples used here will highlight the importance of taking account of both structure and agency when examining how children's identities and relationships are constructed and played out through bedroom space.

### **Keywords**

Structure

Agency

Twin

Sibling

Bedroom

Power

## Introduction

Children's geographers have explored the central role of space and place in the production and construction of childhood. Two central themes have emerged. On the one hand studies have demonstrated the active role that children and young people have played in producing space. On the other hand, many studies have pointed to their exclusion from participation in the production of space (Gallagher, 2006: 162). Although seemingly contradictory, these themes point to the way in which researchers have attempted to grasp the opportunities and constraints that characterise children's lives. Notwithstanding this, Children's Geographies and Childhood Studies more broadly have been criticised for their under-emphasis of structural constraints (Holt, 2011). Whilst, as parts of this literature review will demonstrate, this seems to over-exaggerate the case, this chapter will argue that studying children and young people's personal relationships and relational processes can not only offer us insight into how children build and establish intimacies and identities but also how seemingly micro events are connected to broader structures (Jamieson and Milne, 2012). Amongst other things, this chapter will show how children's use and control of bedroom space are shaped by the gender and generational ordering of society, financial inequalities linked to social class and broader social processes such as individualism and consumerism.

There is a fairly well-established body of research on teenager's bedrooms in the sociology of youth. In contrast, bedroom space is still relatively under-researched in the fields of Children's Geographies and Childhood Studies. Possibly this is not surprising given the comparative neglect of family space in relation to other contexts such as the street, school, neighbourhood and labour market. As Holt (2011: 3) notes, 'until recently there has been limited dialogue between researchers of the family and critical geographies of childhood, and the experiences of children and young people within family contexts has [with some notable exceptions, been] relatively under-explored'.

Within Childhood Studies, the reunion of the child with the family came after researchers had secured children's status as social agents rather than passive receptacles of adult socialisation and culture (James and Prout, 1996). Typically, comparisons between children's agency at 'home' and 'school' have pointed to the home as a space where children have greater opportunities to negotiate relationships. Berry Mayall's UK research (1994; 2006) is central here. She has argued that whilst at home, children tend to be seen as people and parents (typically mothers) encourage their independence and acknowledge and promote their competence, the school tends to see children as projects to be worked upon. 'Children find themselves treated as group members rather than as

individuals, and as objects of socialization rather than as participating people' (1994: 124). Mayall (2006) however, is adamant that we need to set this trend against the broader structural backdrop of patriarchy, social class divisions and the impact of public policies on parenting. Not only are ideas about childhood shaped by powerful men in privileged positions, she argues, but UK policy tends to focus on protection more than participation rights.

Research suggests that within Minority World societies, children's social and physical lives are lived away from the 'adult' territories of public space and increasingly close to (or inside) the home (Jamieson, and Milne, 2012). Inside the home, the bedroom remains one space that children are expected to have to themselves (Mayhew, Uprichard, Beresford, Ridge & Bradshaw, 2004). Cut backs to children's/public services, the privatization of children's leisure facilities (Morrow, 2008) and the increasing adult regulation of children's use of public space (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014) raise important questions about how far children value bedroom space as an opportunity for leisure and an escape from adult-power and control. So how are children and young people's relationships and identities built up and established in and through this space and to what extent does this space offer opportunities for children to shape and influence everyday social/family life?

The concepts of structure and agency are of central importance. Social structures can be conceptualised as a set of 'external' processes and conditions that are woven into the fabric of society. Taking account of the structuring of childhood means examining the 'large-scale patterning of the childhood of a given society' (Prout, 2005: 64). Agency refers to our ability to intervene in social life and thus to shape our own and other people's lives. Thus, identifying children as social agents means accepting that they 'do things' but also their capacity to engage with structures and potentially influence events and relationships (Mayall, 2001). 'Researchers investigating geographies of children, now widely accept that young people have social agency with children perceived as much more than adults-in-waiting...' (Holt, 2011: 2).

This chapter draws together literature from a range of fields including Psychology, Childhood Studies, Cultural Studies, and Sociology. Some of these researchers, like me, may not necessarily identify themselves as 'children's geographers' even though they pay attention to the significance of place, space and social relations. Reflecting the trend in the literature itself, the discussion will focus on the industrialised societies of the Minority World. The chapter starts by exploring research which can highlight the structural contexts within which bedrooms space is allocated. It then moves on to

discuss how children use and control this space alongside a broader consideration of children's familial relationships.

## **HAVING AND USING BEDROOM SPACE**

### ***Having a bedroom***

In Britain, from the second-half of the twentieth century onwards, social expectations that children should have their own bedrooms have been associated with the growing child-centeredness of family life (Mayhew et al., 2004). Indeed, it is common for children in Europe to have their own bedrooms (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001). In England and Wales specifically the average number of bedrooms per household is currently 2.7 and almost half of all families with dependent children have just one child (ONS, 2014). Divorce and separation may mean that some children may find that they have their own bedroom in more than one property (Mayhew et al., 2004).

Reflecting this cultural ideal, parents often want their children to have their own bedroom even if they cannot afford to make this a reality by purchasing a large enough property (Munro and Madigan, 1999). Parents' economic capital (their access to financial resources) is an important structural factor that shapes children's access to and experience of bedroom space. Drawing on accounts of British middle and working class childhood, Sibley (1995) concludes that children in middle class and small families are more likely to have their own bedrooms than their working class counterparts. Similarly, survey research conducted in Tasmania (Australia) reveals that 'Younger students especially from less affluent families in rural and regional areas may not have their own bedroom and have to share with siblings' (Abbott-Chapman and Robertson, 2009: 425). In England, the introduction of the so-called 'bedroom tax' (which charges families claiming housing benefit if they have 'spare' bedrooms) means that low-income families may have to sacrifice this ideal or be charged for it: housing benefit is cut by 14% if there is one 'spare' bedroom and 25% if there are two. According to the size criteria being applied here, a 'spare' room may be designated thus if two same-sex children aged 0-15 or two differently sexed children aged 0-9yrs have their own bedrooms (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014).

Findings from both large- and small-scale pieces of research examining children's use of bedroom or domestic space, reveal how parents' decisions about bedroom allocation reflect norms and values linked to gender and age. In their 12 nation European survey, Bovill and Livingstone (2001) found that whilst 56% of 6-7 year olds had their own rooms, this was higher for older age groups: 69% for 9-10

year olds; 77% for 12-13 year olds, 82% for 15-16 year olds. Older children were thus more likely to have their own rooms than younger children. In line with this, James (2001) found that only 37 of the 276 15 year old girls she studied (in Australia) shared a bedroom.

Norms relating to age-status, birth order, generation and the appropriateness of differently sexed children sharing a room can all shape parents' decision making too. In their mixed-methods study of family use of domestic space (in the Glasgow area of the UK) Munro and Madigan (1999) found that an oldest child may be given priority leaving the younger children to share. Where the children sharing a room were significantly different in age, the parents expressed a preference to separate them. As one mother in Munro and Madigan's study described:

Matt is only four and Gary is ten so there's six years of a difference which is quite a lot. Matt messes up the place and Gary is left to tidy it up. Matt won't go to sleep so he climbs in with Gary and then they have a carry on... (1999: 112).

Pre-teen differently-sexed children should not share a room: as one mother in their study put it, 'Fiona will be twelve and twelve is really an age when they can't share with a boy' (1999: 112).

My small-scale research with twins and their families in the UK (Author, 2010) has many similar findings. The project explored how twins negotiate their identities as they move through the life course. I spoke with parents, twins and siblings of twins to find out how twins' experiences and identities were contextualised by other family relationships. Parents, especially mothers made key decisions about their children's lives such as how to dress their children, place them in classes at school and allocate bedrooms. This is not surprising given that adults are 'normally in command of more material, social and other resources than children, and thus in a more powerful position to shape the everyday conditions of child-life' (Alanen, 1998: 3). Although all the parents chose to place their twins together in one bedroom as babies, they often wanted their children to have their own separate rooms as they got older and this was seen as part of the process of twins growing up and becoming independent individuals. Parents also understood the significance of generation and gender. Caroline told me that she had placed her twin daughters in a different room to their younger sister 'because of the age gap'. Placing them together, she explained, would have meant 'boyfriends' being in the same space as 'dolls'. Anthony also explained that if his twins, Ash and Harry, had an older sibling, 'there'd be differences in what their tastes are [...] and their interests' (See Author, 2010: 74). Parents of the differently-sexed children also explained how their 16 year old children 'ought' to have moved into

separate rooms but because one of the twins could not sleep this arrangement had to be abandoned. One of the twins, Olivia, was, however, very aware of the social stigma surrounding this. She told me, 'Our friends laugh and get really weird when we say we share a room' (Author, 2010: 76). These findings thus demonstrate how the organisation of space may emerge from social relations – linked to age, gender and generation.

Reduction in family size, growing affluence, the growth of 'youth culture' and the youth market of consumer goods has meant that European children's bedrooms have become important spaces of leisure and communication (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001). Research reveals to us the kinds of media that children have access to in their bedrooms. Bovill and Livingstone (2001) found that European children's bedrooms were commonly media-rich environments. Amongst other things, TVs, computers/ games machines and radios were present in children's bedrooms all of which, as we will see later on, may be utilised as tools for identity construction and relationship building. The papers within Neustaedter, Harrison and Sellen's (2013) edited collection give us a more up-to-date summary of media use in the family more broadly - mobile wireless technologies, such as laptops, i-pads and mobile phones are spread throughout the home (and of course they can be transported in and out of the bedroom). Together, these mediums offer multiple and varied opportunities to connect with others including email, text message, phone, video-call, blog, tweet and facebook. Research, however, suggests that some children are more likely to have such opportunities than others. For instance, drawing on data from the UK Children Go Online project with 1,500 9-19 year olds, Livingstone, Bober and Helsper (2005) found that children from middle class backgrounds were more likely to have internet access in their own bedroom than children from working class backgrounds.

### **Using bedroom space: displaying identities, establishing privacy and practising relationships**

Children's use and control of bedroom space varies according to age, gender, culture and the extent of media present within it. In their twelve-nation European comparative project, Bovill and Livingstone (2001) found that whilst teenagers spent more time in their rooms than younger children, girls spent more time in their rooms than boys. Across Europe, having a media-rich bedroom was associated with greater use of the bedroom. However, some media were more heavily utilised in some cultures than others. For instance, use of the TV was higher in the UK than Germany because ownership was high and children's bedtimes later. Taking the UK alone, the research suggests that children under 9 were relatively uninterested in spending time in their bedrooms and preferred family space. The authors argue that whilst the social process of individualisation has meant a shift away

from family time spent together watching TV to individualised media lifestyles where media is personally owned and can be used in 'private' spaces, private ownership of media increases as children get older. From middle childhood, children, especially girls, value the bedroom as a space for isolation and control of media use (TV viewing, computer use and playing music/radio) (Livingstone, 2010). Bovill and Livingstone (2001) suggest that girls' greater interest in communication may explain why the telephone, radio and TV took on more significance for girls, whilst computer-related technologies tended to be more important for boys.

Possibly not surprisingly then, one key finding to emerge from this literature on children's use of bedroom space is that, for teenagers in particular, the bedroom is a space to entertain friends, escape and display identity. As Livingstone (2010: 8) explains:

It provides a convenient location in which personal goods can be gathered and maintained. It provides a means of escape from the interruptions, interference and gaze of others. And it facilitates the routine (re) enactment of a desired identity.

Typically, research about children's so-called 'bedroom culture' examines how they consume, display and utilise media (magazines, TV, Stereos, Internet and other new media) to create and experiment with different versions of identity and make a distinctive culture of their own. This bedroom culture is 'very much a Western phenomenon being dependent on a high degree of modernisation, individualisation and wealth' (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001: 4).

Early research tended to explore more traditional media such as the TV and print magazines. The classic work, often referred to in such discussions, is Angela McRobbie's (1976; 1991) analysis of girls' subcultures. A former member of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, she wanted to re-balance the male-dominated sphere of cultural studies by exploring how girls made a distinctive culture of their own. Postulating the question 'are girls really absent from sub-cultures?' she argued that bedroom culture was one space where girls' teenage consumer culture operated – 'experimenting with make-up, listening to records, reading the mags, sizing up the boyfriends, chatting, jiving...' (1976: 213). Reflecting the timing of her research, she was predominantly interested in the impact of narratives of romance transmitted through pop culture and teenage girls' magazines of the 1980s like 'Jackie'. This pre-packaged 'teeny-bopper' culture which centred on traditional and idealised notions of romance and marriage was not reliant on girls' participation in public space but instead was relatively cheap, relied more on creating a culture based on each other and had limited



risks associated with it. As she notes, it only required a bedroom, record player and permission for a couple of friends to visit. Posters of male pop idols could be gazed on without interruption, male demands for further sexual action, risk of being sexually labelled or humiliation through being stood up. Through their cultural activities, girls could therefore resist normative gender and class expectations. Instead, they created their own space and built a sense of solidarity and connectedness with each other.

Whilst McRobbie's feminist work took an important step in challenging the male-dominance of research about subculture, she only paid limited attention to the bedroom as an actual physical space. As Lincoln (2005: 403) notes, she was more interested in exploring the discursive 'codes' present in teen magazines (like Jackie) and how these were lived out by the teenagers. Yet, it is important to explore the bedroom as a physical space since the objects and spatial arrangements are the spaces that identities and relationships are lived in and through. Carol Smart acknowledges this in her exploration of an emerging field of research which she calls 'personal life'. Personal life is a broader and more inclusive concept than family or kin which captures a range of relationships from friendship, same-sex relationships and acquaintanceship to relationships across households and cross cultural relationships. Importantly, it is in demonstrating how to build a sociological perspective on relationships and connectedness that she draws attention to the importance to taking account of possessions, things and relationality. 'Things' she argues, 'can throw light on social relationships' (Smart, 2007: 157). They are invested with meanings as parts of relationships and therefore 'come to embody to a greater or lesser degree elements of relationships' (Smart, 2007: 166). The next part of this review thus turns to explore in more detail some empirical studies that have attempted to explore (in a more focused way) the physical dimensions of bedroom space and how identities, friendships and privacy are established through it.

Mitchell and Reid-Walsh's (2002) research focuses on both the physical and cultural dimensions of children's bedroom space. They argue that children's bedrooms can be read as 'cultural texts' – as they explain, 'our focus is on employing strategies for engaging in semiotic readings of children's bedrooms as popular culture' (2002: 114). From this perspective then, bedrooms display and contain objects which in turn can reveal pre-packaged, branded and commercialised identities. For young children, who they argue, have less control over bedroom design and decor, Pooh, Mickey and Toy Story can reveal clues about the kinds of childhood we wish for our children. 'A carefree childhood of loveable Disney/A.A. Milne characters?' they ask (2002: 130). For older children who may have more decision-making power, bedrooms contain messages of individual taste and identity. To see what

versions of identity are on offer to these children, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh thus set about analysing different representations of bedroom space in teen magazines and draw on some accounts provided by female readers too. Here we can see some obvious parallels with McRobbie's approach. They found that whilst these magazines reproduce cultural expectations that the teen bedroom should say something about the teen's identity – "clutter queen", "sentimental sister", "neat freak", "happenin hostess" (2002: 135) – in doing so they also convey middle class ideals of moral conduct namely cleanliness and purity. These in turn, they argue, may be based on the more long-standing discursive connections between tidiness and virtue and messiness and slattern (slut).

Lincoln's (2004) research offers us more insight into how girls' friendships are practiced through this space. She draws attention to the physical dimensions of bedroom space by examining how teenage girls 'zone' their bedrooms. According to her:

When researching bedroom culture, a zone is a physical and visible arrangement of furniture, technical equipment, beauty products, schools books, in fact any item that is 'contained' ... within bedroom space. It is orientated by the social activities that take place within the space, therefore it may not be fixed in physical or cognitive activities; zones can overlap and integrate (2004: 97).

Her ethnographic research (2004; 2005), which also takes into account new developments in information communication technology (such as mobile phones and the internet) reveals how teenage girls are actively involved in creating their bedrooms as certain kinds of places. She conducted research with teenagers in their bedrooms (McRobbie interviewed her girls at a youth club) using a variety of data collection tools including photographs and diaries. Her findings revealed how the girls' biographies were displayed on their bedroom walls – posters, postcards and photographs record their cultural interests, nights out and holidays – and how they actively 'zoned' space. The 'fashion and beauty/going out' zone is partially reminiscent of McRobbie's findings. In this zone, the bedroom is a space to experiment with hair, clothes and make-up. Thus a dressing table may be dedicated to cosmetic products. However, in contrast to McRobbie's findings, boys may be invited into this space - they will sit and wait while their girlfriends get ready. In this zone girls perform a range of 'going out' rituals, alcoholic drinks are consumed and music played to help them 'chill out' or 'get in the mood' before they go out:

Leila: We come home from college have a sleep, then have a shower. While one's in the shower, the other's usually deciding what to wear or drying their hair. We have a few drinks [alcoholic], then try to leave about half an hour just to chill out before we go out... (Lincoln, 2004: 104)

The 'sleeping zone/getting in from a night out' may involve a continuation of activities previously engaged in outside the bedroom: girls may recreate the atmosphere of the club by continuing to drink alcohol together, using their mobiles to invite more friends over (Lincoln, 2005). As with the 'going out zone' the teenagers could create a certain kind of ambience through choosing particular kinds of music. Like other more recent studies exploring bedroom culture, Lincoln (2005) examines the role of music in helping girls to express their individual and collective tastes and to shape the dynamics of space. Lighting was also an important resource for zoning space. 'The girls use table lamps, fairy lights, lava lamps, 'dimmer' switches and candles to provide a 'softer light', which mimics the lighting of the pub or club [and...] allows the girls to gossip more freely without embarrassment' (Lincoln, 2004: 105). In the bedroom, then, "'gossiping", "chatting" or "talking" is a popular female activity' (Lincoln, 2004: 100).

Lincoln's research allows us some insight into how girls' friendship rituals and practices of intimacy (Jamieson and Milne, 2012) are embedded in and established through space. Together they exchange information and work to perpetually redefine the meaning of bedroom space. More generally her research is also good at explaining how identities are embedded in and displayed through the design, decoration and ambience of bedroom space – a theme reflected through much of the literature on teenager's bedrooms. Thus Sibley (1995: 122) noted that: 'Particularly when a child has been given its own bedroom, then the space may be appropriated, transformed and the boundaries secured by marking that space as its own'. One working class 15 year old girl in Livingstone's study explained this well:

I'm usually in my bedroom... I think that I like to be by myself really. I don't know. I suppose it's just because at the moment I have got all my furniture arranged like in a sitting room area, a study room area and my bedroom and it is just, like, really cool and i just like to go there because I know that that is my room... I mean I have decorated it how I want and it's just like a room I don't think I will ever move out (2010: 7).

Similarly James (2001) found that girls' bedrooms typically were a place to display their favourite things and in line with this, were defined as a space to be 'themselves'. Both Lincoln (2014) and James (2001) found that such attempts to anchor the 'self' in space reflected the transitional nature of children's identities: bedrooms contained a mixture of items from the 'past' and 'present'. For instance, special collections/memorabilia from a past childhood may be neatly compartmentalised to allow space to display objects which reflect current interests and hobbies. In other cases, objects may be actively removed from the bedroom. For Lincoln (2014) then, the passage of time makes bedrooms constantly evolving material spaces which leave behind 'residual trails'.

Whilst bedrooms may be resources that children can use, both to display their own identities and practice friendships with others, they can also be spaces where they can retreat from a public gaze and disconnect from others. Privacy is therefore one important key theme which emerges from many discussions about children's use of bedroom space. Children may seek this for a number of reasons. Larsen's (1995) study, framed as it is by psychological perspectives on how children 'grow up', uncovers some of the 'developmental' benefits. She studied 483 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> graders (boys and girls, all European-Americans) and explored how the bedroom could help to cultivate a 'private self'. She concluded that, for adolescents, listening to music alone enabled them to create separate experiential spaces for solitude and isolation at a 'stage' when they were establishing their own sense of self, regulating their own emotional lives and partially 'shed[ding] the secure and unquestioned sense of self acquired from their families' (1995: 536).

Other pieces of research have explored how the bedroom may enable some escape from, parental power, family responsibilities and difficult family relationships or experiences. Thus Baker's (2004) empirical research reveals that behind the closed bedroom door, children may listen to music that parents may not approve of. James (2001) noted that children could retreat to their bedrooms in order to try to escape from their mother's 'nagging' and their chores (in the hope they might be distributed to other members of the family). On closer inspection, the research also reveals that children's use of bedroom space may be influenced by the *quality* of their family relationships. In their survey of Year 10, 11/12 students in Tasmania, Abbott-Chapman and Robertson (2009) found that it was those children who said they 'always' wanted to take time out from people and things that bothered them who were most likely to choose their bedroom or a place in nature as their favourite place. Interviews and focus groups revealed that family rows, parents, siblings and pressure from school were amongst the things that bothered them. The bedroom offered peace, quiet and tranquillity and facilitated relaxation as well as freedom. As one student put it, 'my bedroom is my own space – I can do what I

like' (2009: 430). So, when there is family conflict children may use the bedrooms as a space to retreat and disconnect from others.

Within this broad theme of family relationships, some research findings point to the important role that bedroom space has for enabling children to deal with particular kinds of family adversity. In their Norwegian study of children's experiences of growing up with mental health distress, Fjone, Yherhus and Almvik (2009) found that children used their bedroom space to help avoid their parents' displays of aggression or distress. In their Swedish study, Overlien and Hyden (2009) recorded conversations with 15 children aged 12-15yrs during 29 group therapy sessions and 10 individual interviews. For these children, the bedroom was a space where they could try to distance themselves from the violence both physically and emotionally. For instance, they could turn their music up to try to block out the noise of fighting, read or try to close their ears. In reality, however, the children knew that these strategies would not always work. The sound would still be heard; the bedroom space still invaded as one girl pointed out: 'We all ran to our rooms when we were younger (.) but we knew he would come and suddenly open the door and shout terrible things' (2009: 484).

These studies about privacy, family relationships and adversity are important in demonstrating at least two things. Firstly, that the bedroom is an important resource used by children to actively 'cope' with family relationships and adversity. Secondly, family relationships frame and shape children's use of bedroom space, not only their choice of whether or not to seek out privacy but also their ability to sustain it. Possibly not surprisingly, the key relationships which are explored within this context are how parent-child family relationships frame children's use and control of bedroom space. Some forms of parental regulation include initiating volume control and tidying up. Lincoln (2005) found that whilst teenagers could initially choose the type of music they listened to, who they listened with and the volume they listened to it at, parents could try to regulate aspects of this. As Ryan (aged 16) pointed out: 'Often my parents will shout down to me to turn my music down cos they say they can hear it "thumping" in the lounge' (2005: 410). Similarly, James (2001) found that whilst children could attempt to control bedroom design, who they shared their company with and their choice of music and related volume control, mothers (in particular) would often 'nag' them to tidy up 'messy' space. Where mothers do actually 'tidy up' their teenagers bedroom, this can be experienced as an invasion of privacy. As one 15 year old girl explained to Livingstone (2010:8) in her UK research:

Last year I went to Australia and erm, I came back and I nearly had a heart attack because my mum had completely cleaned my room ... She had completely blitzed my room and I was so

angry about it ... It is my own private space and I really don't like her touching it ... (Middle class girl, aged 15).

The reach of adult power may vary according to the age of the children in the family and the kind of relationships that parents develop with them. Reflecting broader cultural assumptions that increased age brings increased level of competence, my study with twins showed that parents afforded their children more decision-making power as they get older (Author, 2010). Clare, mother to 8 year old twins, was concerned with her sons' preferences for Harry Potter wallpaper.

**Clare:** well we haven' decorated yet because you said you want Harry Potter on don't you? And I say 'no, we're not having Harry Potter on, we're having grown-up wall paper!' (Author, 2010: 122)

Similarly, Rosa, one of the seven girls (aged between 8 and 11) studied by Baker (2004), reported how her mother had forced her twin brother to take down from the wall the poster of Jennifer Lopez posing naked. This parental directive only had limited impact however as Rosa explained, 'he has it in his cupboard instead' (2004: 84). Parents' attempts to regulate space may therefore not always be wholly successful!

In my research (Author, 2010) it was the parents of the youngest (and working class) children that erected a clear (and strong) adult-child boundary, hoping to keep their children as (innocent) children for as long as possible by directing and controlling their children's behaviour and limiting their access to 'adult' information. In contrast two parents of older (and middle class children) wanted to 'be 'more friends with them rather than parents' (Mike) and allowed them more decision making power at home.

As this review has already discussed, adult power also stretches into parental control over economic resources and their decisions about the kind and size of house to buy. The actual size of the bedroom can constrain the amount of socialising time spent there. In their study, Munro and Madigan (1999) found that when the children's bedrooms were very small and not really big enough for more than one child, other spaces were opened up – some more temporary than others. For instance, a loft space may be converted into a play area, or a 'family' living room time-zoned so that children have priority during the early evening and adults later on. However where possible, and especially for older children, the expectation was that their friends be taken upstairs to play rather than intrude on adult

space. Lincoln (2004) and Livingstone (2010) found that the presence or absence of parents in the family home could influence the spaces that teenagers used. When their parents were out, they would make more use of 'family' spaces such as the living room or kitchen. When they returned they would once again retreat to their bedrooms. Parents may therefore directly or indirectly shape children's use of space at home and, through purchasing various props and regulating how space is used, help to shape the kinds of places that children create in their bedrooms. As Jess and Massey (1995: 134) explain, 'It is people themselves who make places but not always in circumstances of their own choosing'.

Research examining children's access to public space is relevant to this discussion since, as writers like McRobbie and Livingstone (2010) have argued, children's access to public space may shape their use of bedroom space or domestic space more broadly. In her early study of 12-16 year old working class girls from Yorkshire, Griffiths (1988) found that parental fears of danger, especially in the winter months when the nights drew in, could serve to restrict girls' access to public space pushing them further back into the family home. Although the older girls enjoyed 'dosing out' on the streets and had more opportunities to do this in the summer months, in winter the girls vanished from the streets leaving the boys presence to dominate. More contemporary research, however, suggests that simple generalised statements about children's use of public space, based on age or gender are too simplistic and superficial. For instance, Valentine (1997) has shown that such expectations of sex-typed behaviour are changing. In a reversal of traditional stereotypes, parents saw their 8-11year old daughters to be more responsible, rational and mature than similar aged boys. They had more common sense and 'nous' than boys and were therefore seen to be more competent at negotiating public space than boys. Parents were not always in agreement though and often fathers had a more traditional perspective than mothers, who tended to contextualise their decisions by paying attention to their daughter's personal characteristics.

As this section on adult-child relationships demonstrates, the bulk of research which explores children's use of bedroom/domestic space has tended to focus on how children's agency may be enabled and constrained by parent-child family relationships. Less research has been conducted on how siblings shape each other's use of space and social relationships and even less so with twins specifically. Indeed, one assumption that underpins many of these studies is that bedroom space is an individually owned (rather than shared) space. As Lincoln (2004: 96) notes:

It is a room that provides respite from the public world, from the demands of peers, siblings and parents, in which unmediated activities such as sleeping, reading books and magazines, daydreaming and 'chilling out' take place.

However, some children *do* share bedrooms. As we have already seen, this may be more common for children whose parents have lower incomes. One useful study of sibling relationships which does explore the significance of bedroom space, including shared bedroom space, is Edwards, Hadfield, Lucey & Mauthner's research (2005; 2006). Here we see how bedroom space and the 'things' within it are resources which children actively utilise to 'do' or practise their sibling relationships. For some children, sharing a bedroom could cause conflict whilst for others it was just part of the way things were. For some jointly owning possessions was a basis for establishing connectedness and for others it was a source of dispute and a means of marking out their emotional separation from their siblings. Evidencing Smart's (2007) earlier claims then, objects could symbolically mark out degrees of emotional closeness. Conflict over ownership of space and objects meant that siblings sometimes competed for power and control over space. However, power was not neatly tied in with 'birth order status'. Rather siblings could be deemed older or younger depending on the kinds of roles they performed.

Similar themes emerged from my own study (Author, 2010) with child twins. Many twins told me that 'sharing' was a defining characteristic of life as a twin and all the twins I spoke with had some experience of sharing a room. For the youngest twins aged 8, spending time together at home was one of the good things about being a twin and indeed this was actively encouraged by their parents. These twins explained how they would play on the play station together, play with lego and develop clubs. In contrast, many of the older teenage twins who were still sharing a room at the time of interview often felt frustrated. Reflecting this sentiment, when asked to describe that is was like to be a twin, Hannah (aged 15) drew a picture of herself pulling her hair out. She explained that conflict and arguments were common features of her relationships with her twin sister Charlotte.

Some of these older (female) twins named and claimed space and objects in order to mark out territory as their own. Beds, as the most basic personal space, could be especially important in marking out whose 'side' was whose and used to create different 'zones' (Lincoln, 2004). For instance, Emma and Ruth placed their beds either side of the 'big divide' (an alcove). Possessions were sometimes used as symbols of separation – as Hannah explained, 'Charlotte's TV's on her side and I've got the CD player on my side' (Author, 2010: 134). This process of naming and claiming objects, therefore



reflected their frustrations over sharing a bedroom and the emotional and physical separation they sought. I therefore argue that twins may be valuable human resources for each other since they offer each other the opportunity to interdependently establish dimensions of distinction and individuality.

Sharing space and objects could encroach on twins' sense of autonomy and ability to make self-determined choices: As Liam explained:

**Liam:** [...] I'd like be watching TV he'd 'I want to watch something else' like that, and then there'd be like er, I'd be like reading a book and I'll have the light on and he goes 'I want to go to sleep, turn the light off'. And it was just silly things like that and you think 'I need my own room really' [...]. (Author, 2010: 131)

In this example, Dan's ability to generate the right environment for sleep demands some cooperation.

When children share a room, there may be limited space for privacy. This conclusion is borne out in other research findings relating to siblings. For instance, from her study of 90 5-17 year old children in Central Scotland, Punch (2008) found that due to their shared history, experiences and upbringing, sibs may struggle to control the kinds of information that their fellow siblings have of them. Compounding this, sibs also have less ability than parents to restrict access to their own space. My research (Author, 2010) argues that the difference between twin and sibling relationships and experiences may be one of degree. Because twins, unlike siblings, grow up amidst cultural expectations and stereotypes which tend to undermine their individuality and capacity for autonomous thought and action ('twins' are expected to 'look the same', are 'close' and spend time together) sharing a room may be especially frustrating for them.

Frustrated by having to share a bedroom at home, Hannah spent time apart from her twin sister Charlotte when socialising with friends outside of the family home. At home, she occasionally sat in the bathroom to establish isolation: as she explained, 'there's a lock on [the door] and no one can get in' (Author, 2010: 141). Hannah had a younger sister too, but she told me that she and her twin sister Charlotte would tell her to leave their bedroom if they had friends to visit because 'she just starts acting cocky'. At 3 years their junior Ellie carries the stigma of being 'childish'. In contrast to Hannah and Charlotte, Ellie has a room of her own but feels isolated from her twin sisters as a consequence of this. As she explains:

Well like, my sist- like Hannah and Charlotte have got each other, share a bedroom and that. But like when I'm feeling a bit left out, my mum like chats with me and she says we're just like twins. And like when my sisters are having a go at me, then my mum will have a go at them and she'll back me up (Author, 2010: 139).

This example clearly shows how space (and parental decisions over bedroom allocation) can help to mould social relationships.

Research on sibling relationships reminds us that children's agency may be shaped by the relationships they have with other children too - power is not only a feature of intergenerational relationships but also of intragenerational relationships. In her comparison of adult-child and sibling relations in Scotland, Punch (2005) notes that whilst children may accept that parents have legitimate authority over them because they have responsibility for them and identify them as caretakers, power is more contested and disputed amongst siblings who may use bargaining and physical force to get what they want. As was the case in her study, my research with twins showed that power did not always rest with same person. Notwithstanding this, sometimes the twins' narratives depicted one twin as the chief instigator of change. For example, Sally identified her sister Rachel and Rebecca identified her twin sister Andrea as the person that instigated the move to live more independent lives (Author, 2010: 149). In some cases then, power imbalances may mean that some twins end up following the changes instigated by their fellow twin. Conversely, however, twins may need to rely on each other for changes like 'independence' to be effectively socially established and sustained.

One particularly important dimension of children's intragenerational power relationships is gender and some studies on sibling relationships have revealed the extent to which these relationships reveal gender inequalities. For instance, Edwards, Hadfield & Mauthner (2005) have noted that brother-sister relationships tend to work on male terms. Whilst brothers tend to establish connections with each other through doing activities together, girls tend to do this through talking. In brother-sister relationships however, doing things together takes precedence over talking. Thus they conclude that 'children "do" gender in their relationships with other children' (Edwards et al., 2005: 500).

McNamee's (1998; 1999) analysis concentrated specifically on children's use of computer games at home. She found that when girls shared a computer with their brother, this usually meant that the computer was placed in his bedroom and girl's access was more heavily restricted as a result. More recent research also supports these findings. In their study of 23 teenage girls' uses of music, Werner

(2009) found that brothers limited their sister's access to media technologies and that new technology was given to boys. In contrast, sister relationships had no such limitations.

In contrast to these findings, there is also evidence to suggest that (in a similar vein to McRobbie's conclusions) bedroom space may also be a useful resource for resisting patriarchy. In her Australian study of 16 year old girls' use of bedroom space, James (2001) found that this space offered girls seclusion from critical audiences (especially comments from boys about their physical appearance and athletic competence). It was a place to hide public displays of emotions (so no one would see they were upset) and it was experienced as a safe place. Girls therefore actively chose to retreat to this 'safe' and protective space. However, we should not simply assume that this reflects the girls' agency. Indeed, James herself asks if these 'real' choices or just paths of least resistance? She concludes that if their reasons for taking these courses of action were really results of the gender ordering (and inequalities) rooted in society then these choices were at best limited:

Although the girls believed that they freely chose active or passive, solitary or shared recreation, they seemed unaware that their choices were limited by factors over which they had little control (2001: 86).

### **Relationships, structure and agency**

This final section discusses some relevant and important theoretical tools for helping conceptualise children's sibling and family relationships and the interplay between structure and agency.

Of particular importance to our consideration of sibling and parent-child relationships is the significance of 'generation' and 'intergenerationality'. Vanderbeck (2007: 205) notes that 'Intergenerational relationships and the generational ordering of society are inherently geographical phenomenon'. Hence, some spaces be classified as 'children's spaces' or 'adult's spaces'. Children and adults may also have different degrees of access to particular spaces on the grounds of their age (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Whilst the concept of 'generational ordering' identifies how society is organised and ordered into two main groups ('children' and 'adults') the concept of 'generationing' helps to explore the process through which people become constructed and positioned as 'children' and 'adults' (Alanen, 2001). These concepts are of central importance within Childhood Studies and Children's Geographies (for an example see Alanen and Mayall, 2001).

The empirical data cited here suggests that not all parents will construct these generational categories in the same ways. As we have seen the adult-child boundary may vary in its level of intensity; whilst some parents have a strong concept of how their adult role distinguishes them from 'children', others may wish to establish a more 'equal' relationship where this intergenerational power imbalance is played down. Children's identities and relationships are produced through these interactions.

Relationships do not just take place inside space. In this scenario, space is a mere container for action. Instead, this review has demonstrated that relationships are embedded in space. They can be produced through space – so space can alter the nature and form of social relationships. Relationships can also alter the form and feeling of physical space. As this indicates, relationships must be established and practiced. David Morgan (1996) promoted the notion of 'family practices' to demonstrate how families were created and lived through human action rather than structural institutions / 'things'. Reflecting this sentiment, Edwards et al. (2006: 9) argue that we should conceptualise sibling relationships as 'sibling practices'. This move us away from thinking about sibling relationships as fixed entities and instead focuses on how they are constructed and attributed with meaning by sisters and brothers themselves.

As we have seen children can, and do intervene to shape their own lives and the lives of others, but in order to best capture this process, we need to think about social action as relational (incorporating interdependencies) and embodied. First, the relationships that children have with their parents, peers and siblings and the identities they construct depend on others. Space may be opened up and shut down as children disconnect and (re)connect with others. Even privacy, separation and disconnection have to be socially established. Siblings and twins require the presence of each other when they name and claim objects, agree and dispute how space should be classified and used and identify themselves in relation to each other. Attributing children with agency then, does not mean that children have to be independent autonomous individuals.

Recently, researchers have started to develop a more systematic and sustained consideration of the nature of human agency and, in particular, drawn attention to how some modernist definitions of agency may ultimately exclude some groups of children and young people who do not live up to this impossible ideal. In response to these debates, researchers within childhood studies and children's geographies have started to emphasise the co-dependence, interdependence and the reciprocity of human action (Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Author, 2012 ). Thus in their study of sibling relationships Edwards et al. (2006: 2) argue that: 'Their social identities are continually formed, embedded, and also

constrained, in and through their relationships with their siblings' (Edwards et al., 2006: 59). Similarly, when setting out a sociological approach to the study of 'Personal Life' Smart argues that:

[It] does not presume that there is an autonomous individual who makes free choices and exercises unfettered agency... it is conceptualized as always already part of the social. This is because the very possibility of personal life is predicated upon a degree of self-reflection and also connectedness with others (2007: 28).

This chapter has shown that through their identity-making and place-making, children interact with and sometimes rely on other people and objects to intervene in and shape their own and other people's lives. Whilst a range of family/parental expectations frame and potentially shape children's experiences (bedrooms should be tidy, music volume set at a reasonable level, 'inappropriate' posters taken down, chores completed, friends taken upstairs and so on) children do not necessarily simply adhere to these. Rather a retreat to the bedroom may enable children to avoid chores or a bedroom poster may be relocated to a more private area of bedroom space.

Agency is also embodied – we live in and experience the world through our bodies. Indeed some of the literature cited here emphasises that children's use of bedroom space is a sentient experience that involves seeing, looking, touching, creating, listening. What happens inside the bedroom (for example playing music) can shape what happens outside of it (for example as music invades other people's space and sentient experiences and also potentially shapes parents' reactions). Indeed, this review has demonstrated that children's embodied experience of bedroom space may be connected to a whole range of other spaces, from the night club and living room to the internet and global consumer culture. The child's bedroom is 'a site of reception for commercial messages and a location for the display and use of consumer goods' (Livingstone, 2010: 9). We should therefore be wary of making superficial distinctions between so-called public and private spaces, between 'home' and neighbourhood because these spaces can and do overlap.

Various authors within childhood studies and children's geographies have developed models for helping conceptualise the interplay between structure and agency. James and Prout's (1995) 'grid-group' model of 'hierarchy and boundary' recognised that where group membership and social hierarchies are strong, agency may be weak. Similarly, Klocker's (2007) notions of 'thick' and 'thin' agency reveal that children may have more or less capacity to transform their own or other people's lives through their action depending on the grip of structural constraints. She explains:

‘thin’ agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few viable alternatives. ‘Thick’ agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options. It is possible for a person’s agency to be ‘thickened’ or ‘thinned’ over time and space, and across their various relationships (2007: 85).

Klocker’s distinction is especially useful for helping us get an instant sense of the density and variability of agency. For instance, children’s agency may be potentially thickened if parents afford children meaningful decision making power, if siblings cooperate with and agree to the organisation, use and reclassification of ‘shared’ space. Agency may be thinned if, through the process of generationing, parents establish rigid and hierarchical generational relations, siblings dominate and overpower their other sibs and if other customary practices linked to gender limit the range of opportunities available to children.

## **Conclusion**

Children, like adults, are both the authors and products of the social world; social life is both structured by them and for them. This review of research about children’s bedrooms indicates that children’s use of bedroom space has to be contextualised by a range of broader social and cultural processes. Consumerism, individualism, globalisation, patriarchy and the generational ordering of society all shape what happens in this seemingly very ‘micro’ and local space. Institutionalised norms and social divisions linked to gender, age, birth order and social class also help to structure and contextualise children’s experiences and use of bedroom space. Notwithstanding this, children can and do shape their own lives and the lives of other people, not necessarily in isolation but through their relationship with other people and objects. Their agency may be thickened and thinned according to the opportunities and constraints which characterise their lives.

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