

Walking, talking and drawing with children – in search of alternative cartographies

Kemal Ahson

University of Helsinki - kemal.ahson@helsinki.fi

Keywords: Children, Alternative Cartographies, Psychogeography, Arts-based practices

Abstract:

How we imagine people and places, both help shape our understanding of the environment we live in and defines ourselves (Said, 2003). Emotional attachments are critical as they create a sense of place and a series of cognitive, affective and embodied understandings that are developed through place-based experiences and relationships (Steger et al., 2021). For children, the optics of ‘imagination’ and ‘emotion’ have helped researchers understand their perceptions, fears and fantasies about play, place and landscape. These optics have also helped researchers consider how children’s understanding of the world helps shape their actions (Holloway & Valentine, 2004) or create child-centric representations of space and place (Bavidge, 2006).

But how can we ‘do’ spatial analysis around children’s emotions and their imaginative geography? More specifically, can we ‘map’ children’s emotions to understand their sense of place? ‘Mapping’ emotions has a long history, such as with the 17th century *Carte du tendre* (Devaux-Spatarakis, 2016). More recently, ‘emotional cartography’ has presented different spatial and emotional realities upon the felt geography of places, and tools from Geographical Information Systems (GIS) have visualised intimate biometric data and emotional experiences (Nold, 2009). Mapping and maps, however, are contention (Monmonier, 2005). Maps are not necessarily transparent, simply reflecting reality, but are socially constructed and reflect power (Pinder, 2014). Like a graph, the representation of ‘data’ on a map influences the interpretation of the content and nature of the sources (Ogborn, 2014). Criticisms of GIS include how they are emblematic of certain power that interrogates data spatially and temporally (Knowles et al, 2015), and how they may not capture the subjective qualities of human experiences (Griffin & McQuoid, 2012). These criticisms also reflect a history of cartography linked to the refinement of spatial measurement and representation according to clearly defined mathematical principles in pursuit of military and economic power (Harvey, 1996). Children are not like adults and their bodies and minds are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of, *inter alia*, climate change. They also tend to be ignored and/or disregarded when it comes to decisions made about them (UNICEF, 2023). Methodologically, then, cartographic and mapping techniques still risk a negative power of adults over children (Swords et al, 2019).

The Cultural Literacies’ Value in Europe (CLiViE) project seeks to explore children’s emotional attachments to place by liberating cartography from the adult constructions of children’s lives. In empirical work undertaken with eight-year-olds in Helsinki (Finland), the project combined the walking practices of ‘psychogeographers’ and the talking and drawing experiences from arts-based practices (ABPs), to create new child-centric cartographies. This work also considered how the *derive* or ‘drift’ of psychogeography could challenge how adult’s view and construct the world.

Several methodological observations emerged from this research. First, as a qualitative research tool, ABPs provided a layer of visual data and information to complement ‘textual’ data, and to engage with the experiences of children’s voices in society. Combining ‘walking’ and ‘talking’ with the ‘drawing’ of maps helped extend researchers’ perspectives by allowing children to fully participate in the research process. However, in doing so, it was easy to overlook children’s own capacities and limitations as some did not like to colour in or draw, or chose to play their own game and move beyond the remit of the research. Second, the ‘materiality’ of the maps highlighted the limitations of two-dimensional paper representations of children’s three-dimensional socio-emotional worlds. Inadvertently, this two-dimensionality also led to the execution of particular epistemologies or forms of analytical thought which were seemingly adult-centric. Third, the maps created by the children proved difficult to ‘read’ (see Figure 1). Ready-made code books or legends did not exist and the interpretation of aspects of the maps, such as the ‘smiley’ faces, were underpinned by assumptions that were not easily validated. Finally, the shifting of the *derive* as a means of social engagement to a tool for qualitative research highlighted some of the limits of how the intellectual identity of a researcher (in academia) can be mobilised in different contexts.

For researchers, ‘walking, talking and drawing with children’ offers an opportunity to capture alternative grammars and vocabularies from children. It also allows children to participate in the research process in a meaningful way. Combined with other established techniques, they can be part of a multiple methodological approach which is socially engaging for children. However, this coming together of qualitative research methods, art and activism can also end up leading to methodological uncertainty. In fact, the above observations point to a wider discussion on possible epistemological and methodological tensions and whether there are categorical distinctions between, for example,

‘scientific’ and ‘artistic’ research. Critically, the embracing of such multiple methodological approaches to investigate place and imagination is not universal and some scholars believe that there is a fundamental gap between what we consider scientific knowledge and imagination (Bachelard, 2014).

That noted, the bringing together of different methodological practices can encourage the emergence of process-based philosophies of enquiry in which typical dualities represented by maps are dissolved (Harvey, 2016). Here, ‘emotional cartography’ can encourage dialectical methods which describe both the process of map making and the contexts in



which they emerge as part of a ‘post-representational cartography’ (Kitchin, 2014). The research also allows us to consider the benefits of ‘going beyond’ cartography as a set of practices in mapping and to use it to provide (alternative) ontological and epistemological entry points for advocacy and research. The question of how to ‘do’ spatial analysis around children’s emotions and their imaginative geography, then, brings us full-circle to how we use methodology (and what might be discovered) to refine or redefine the idea of imaginative geography. To that end, it is worth turning to research on ‘beginnings’ (Said, 1997) and ask: what really goes on when we begin?

Acknowledgements

This research has been undertaken as part of the CLiViE project which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon Europe Research and Innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101132285.

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