



UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE



Children's discourses of natural spaces and the influence on their subjective well-being

Presenters:

Sabirah Adams & Shazly Savahl

Department of Psychology, University of the Western
Cape

Background

- Why nature?
- Nature as a relational space of children and young people
- Space and place?
 - *Space is more abstract than place, that what commences in experience as an indistinct space, develops into a place as a child experiences a setting, and becomes familiar with it through lived experiences and by assigning particular meanings to it.* (Tuan, 1977)
- Children's experiences and engagement in nature has reduced
 - *Nature-deficit disorder* (Louv, 2008. 'The Last Child in the Woods')
- Time spent in nature enhances children's well-being both directly and indirectly
- In a study testing the relationship between children's environmental worldviews and their subjective well-being, we found no significant relationship (Adams, Savahl, & Casas, forthcoming). Why?

Background

- Kerret, Ronen, and Orkibi's (2014)
"explanatory theoretical model proposes psychological mechanisms through which 'green' schools may influence not only students' learned environmental behavior (EB) but also their SWB."
- In South Africa, consideration of access to safe natural spaces
 - > Low socio-economic status (SES) communities
- Verdugo (2012) conducted a comprehensive comparative analysis of the theory of environmental psychology and sustainability, and positive psychology,
 - > draws attention to fundamental similarities upon which disciplines are based
 - > environmental psychology advances the principles of convalescing the quality of life and environmental quality.
- In South Africa, consideration of access to safe natural spaces
 - > Low socio-economic status (SES) communities

3

Aim of the study

- The aim of the study was to explore how children *construct and assign meaning* to natural spaces. Within this process the study aimed to explore how children's understandings of the significance of nature interactions *influence* their *subjective well-being*. The objectives of the study are:
 - ❖ To explore how children use *specific discursive resources* and *repertoires* to construct and assign meaning to their engagement with natural spaces
 - ❖ To explore how children's constructions and assignments are manifested in their discourses
 - ❖ To explore children's perceptions of the extent to which engagement with natural spaces influences their subjective well-being

4

Method

- **Design**
 - > Qualitative methodological framework
- **Research context**
 - > Three socio-economically diverse areas in the Western Cape: Gordon's Bay, Mitchell's Plain, and Stellenbosch
- **Sampling**
 - > 12-year old children (generally in grade 6 in primary school) from three schools (Total: 28 children)
 - > The motivation for selecting this age cohort is due to the identification in the literature that children of this age group are more likely to *assess their own behaviour and the impact of their subsequent actions upon the environment* (Wilson, 1996)

Table 1: Sample composition

Research site	Sample	Age	Grade	Socioeconomic status
Gordon's Bay (urban)	n = 10 (9 girls; 1 boy)	12	6	Medium
Mitchell's Plain (urban)	n = 10 (5 girls; 5 boys)	11-12	6	Low
Stellenbosch (rural)	n = 8 (5 girls; 3 boys)	12-14	5 - 7	Low

Method

- **Data collection**
 - > 9 focus group interview sessions with 12-year old children
 - > Sustained contact model- five months

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6	Session 7
Group 1	Pre-emptive session	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Photovoice training Session and community mapping	Photovoice discussion session	Termination
Group 2	Pre-emptive session	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Photovoice training Session and community mapping	Photovoice discussion session	Termination
Group 3	Pre-emptive session	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Photovoice mission	Photovoice discussion session	Termination

Method

Table 2: Focus group guiding questions

Focus group 1:	Focus group 2-3
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What does being happy mean to you?• What are the things that make you happy?• What do you do for fun?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What does nature mean to you?• Tell me about how you spend your time in the natural environment?• How does spending time in the natural environment make you feel?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you do in your free time?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you think spending time in nature is important for children your age?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you understand by the natural environment and natural spaces?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How would you feel if you were unable to engage in natural spaces?• What are your favourite places in nature? Why? What do you do there?

7

Method

◉ Data Analysis

> Discourse analysis

- Version by Potter and Wetherell (1987)
- A strand of discourse analysis which has been employed to scrutinise language in a broader social context
- The discourse analysis was preceded by a thematic analysis
- The emerging discourses were analysed within these themes.

◉ Procedure and Ethics

8

Findings

- Four key themes emerged
 - > THEME 1: Safety and natural spaces
 - > THEME 2: Degradation of nature and efforts toward sustainable development
 - > THEME 3: Appreciation of natural spaces
 - > THEME 4: Nature and children's subjective well-being

9

Emerging discourses

1. ***Safety as a pervasive concern***
2. ***Desensitisation***
3. ***Nature as the dangerous other***
4. ***Children as vulnerable***
5. *Repudiation of responsibility*
6. *Thinking environmentally, acting pro-environmentally.*
7. *Eco-crisis*
8. *Nature as nurturer*
9. *Intrinsic care for nature*
10. *Superficial nature*
11. *Nature the catalyst for social connections*
12. *Nature as a special place*

10



Summary of emerging discourses

- Importance that engagement with natural spaces has on their subjective well-being
- Discourse of *safety as a pervasive concern* was one of the most prominent themes
 - > Children from low-SES communities
 - > Widespread *desensitisation*
 - > Credible, ubiquitous threat facing children directly negatively impacted their well-being
- Children from middle-SES community
 - > Fears of ‘wild nature’

11



Summary of emerging discourses

- Discourse of *children as vulnerable*
 - > Children rely on adults for a sense of safety
 - > Self-esteem
- *Discourse on nature as the dangerous other*
 - > Linked to crime and violence in South Africa
 - > *Synonymise nature with danger*
- Lack of engagement in nature:
 - > *Discourse of superficial nature*
 - > Nature as an *ideal* space of childhood
 - > Unclean natural spaces- linked to the eco-crisis discourse
 - > Discourse of thinking environmentally, acting pro-environmentally; issues around sustainable development

12



Summary of emerging discourses

- Nature was seen as an escape
 - > Contingent on being a *safe* natural space
 - > Reflective nature of nature
 - > Restorative effect of memorable experiences in nature- particularly for children living in adverse conditions
 - > *Intergenerational transmission of environmental consciousness*
 - > Children's relationship with nature has evinced a critical role on their "future life trajectories" (Huby & Bradshaw, 2006)

13



Conclusion

- The significance of nature then provides the impetus for developing research studies to evaluate the influence of children's engagement in nature and the related impact on their SWB,
 - > how these benefits can be harnessed to better children's quality of life.

14



- ◎ sabirah.adams@gmail.com
- ◎ Or
- ◎ ssavahl@uwc.ac.za