Geographies of inclusion, exclusion and belonging in young lives

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Introduction: Geographies of Exclusion, Inclusion and Belonging in Young Lives

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The papers that comprise this theme issue on Exclusion, Inclusion, and Belonging emerged from a set of sessions on children's geographies conducted at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers in New Orleans in February 2003. In many respects, these themes are familiar ones for geographers interested in childhood and youth. One of the central projects of recent work in children's geographies, for example, has been the analysis of young people's exclusion from full participation in society's activities and spaces by both formal legal frameworks and everyday practices that serve to naturalize adult authority. However, the papers in this collection by Caitlin Cahill, David Dodman, Louise Holt, Peter Hopkins, Kathryn Morris-Roberts, and Pamela Wridt collectively enhance our mappings of familiar territory while also pushing us to explore challenging new directions empirically, theoretically, and methodologically. In particular, the papers enrich our understanding of how various dimensions of social difference (including 'race', ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, and disability) are implicated in processes and experiences of exclusion, inclusion, and belonging at multiple scales (cf. Holloway and Valentine, 2000). The young participants in this diverse set of studies, as the authors demonstrate, often reproduce broader societal discourses and practices which serve to 'other' particular groups of young people, but they are also active cultural producers in their own right, capable of challenging exclusionary discourses and practices and creating their own complex systems of inclusion and belonging. In addition, the papers illustrate the increasingly diverse range of 'inclusive' methods being employed by geographers which allow young people greater latitude to express their views, represent their lives, and, in some cases, even to frame research questions and shape research agendas. Before discussing the individual contributions of the papers in greater depth, however, we briefly review some of the key ways in which themes of exclusion, inclusion, and belonging have featured in broader debates in the social sciences and specifically within children's geographies.

The concept of exclusion has featured prominently in academic and social policy discourses over the past several decades, perhaps most notably in the countries of the European Union (where 'social exclusion' is a major political and academic

buzzword) but also in other contexts. Defining this concept, however, has not proven an easy task, and the notion of exclusion itself has sometimes been critiqued as a kind of vague catch-all used to describe a variety of societal inequalities and maladies. When we speak of individuals and groups as experiencing exclusion, from what precisely are they being excluded? Perhaps the most common usage of the notion of exclusion within the social sciences is in relation to the economy and labor market (e.g. Bramley *et al.*, 2000; Seyfang, 2001). Indeed, some commentators have charged that 'social exclusion' has become little more than a codeword for 'poverty' or 'material deprivation' and that there needs to be a broader understanding of the concept (see Ratcliffe, 1999). In a widely quoted definition, Duffy (1995, p. 5) attempts to draw the distinction between poverty and exclusion as follows:

> Social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political, and cultural life, and, in some characterisations, alienation and distance from the mainstream society.

These broader formulations of exclusion move beyond relatively narrow economic formulations, and allow for the consideration of how other dimensions of social difference are implicated in processes of exclusion (although there are concerns that characterizations of exclusion which prioritize 'distance' from the mainstream society—and thus the need to incorporate or 'include' people in the mainstream—have fundamentally assimilationist implications (cf. Levitas, 1998; Sibley, 1998; Vanderbeck, in press)).

Recent work by social and cultural geographers, for whom notions of identity and difference have been central, emphasizes how space and place are central components of processes of exclusion, and, as Sibley (1995) suggests, we can think in terms of *geographies of exclusion*. In some cases, the spatial dimensions of exclusion are relatively transparent, such as in cases of hypersegregation and ghettoization based on race or ethnicity. The spatiality of exclusion can also be more subtle, however, such as when various groups (including young people, as we elaborate below) are constructed as abject and/or considered 'out of place' in specific contexts (see also Cresswell, 1997). In the British context, for example, groups including ravers and New Age Travellers (among others) have often been viewed as polluting the countryside, resulting in efforts to purify these spaces with legal measures which allow discrepant 'others' to be removed (Sibley, 2001; Vanderbeck, 2003). As Sibley (1995) emphasizes, practices of exclusion are also clearly evident in the field of knowledge production when certain ways of understanding space and place are privileged over others, a process he calls *the exclusion of geographies*.

The very coalescence of children's geographies into a recognizable subfield has in no small part been predicated on an exclusion of geographies, i.e. the exclusion of young people's lives and experiences from the mainstream of human geography, mirroring broader patterns of social relations which peripheralize young people's experiences and perspectives. As a number of geographers have recognized, the willingness to conceptually exclude those constructed as 'minors' from equal personhood with adults has a number of distinct spatial manifestations. The socio-spatial exclusion of young people is evident in research on the regulation of youth in consumption and other 'public' spaces (e.g. Valentine, 1996; Matthews *et al.*, 2000; Vanderbeck and Johnson, 2000), restrictions to children's independent spatial mobility (e.g. O'Brien *et al.*, 2000), and the imposition of age-based curfews in some localities (e.g. Collins and Kearns, 2001), to name but a few areas. Bauder (2002) uses the notion of cultural exclusion in his examination of how young people from neighborhoods with different reputations (based

in part on the ethnic and class makeup of these neighborhoods) are steered towards particular training and educational opportunities.

This exclusion narrative, which runs through much of the literature, is tempered with a recognition that exclusion is certainly not the only reality of young people's experiences. Nairn *et al.* (2003), for example, explore the complicated dynamics of both inclusion and exclusion within a local community in New Zealand. Although conflicts with adults over the use of public space were a significant part of these young people's experiences, many also felt included in the wider life of their communities in important ways. Geographers have also turned critical attention to practices actively meant to foster young people's senses of inclusion. In some localities, for example, there is evidence that young people's voices are being taken more seriously at the level of planning and policy, although still in rather circumscribed ways. Matthews and Limb (2001) and Cunningham and Dillon (2003), among others, have contributed to our understanding of formal efforts to include young people in processes of political decision making and urban design, although as these works note, one must think critically about the extent to which these practices actually destabilize dominant adult authority. Exclusion, inclusion, and belonging have not been viewed strictly through the lens of the often problematic power differentials between young people and adults, however. Researchers have also examined the complex geographies that young people form amongst themselves, including how they create their own forms of belonging and inclusion while in some cases actively contributing to the socio-spatial exclusion of other young people. Thus, for example, Valentine *et al.* (2002) discuss how young people's 'everyday practices of social exclusion' in schools (in this case, related to gender and class) serve to restrict some young people's access to internet communication technologies, in the process highlighting the importance of examining young people's micro-territorial practices in institutional spaces.

The themes we have discussed above feature in varying ways in the papers in this collection. We begin with David Dodman's analysis of adolescents' views of their environment and senses of belonging at multiple scales (home, school, city, country) in Kingston, Jamaica. Dodman's work is rooted in the fundamental premise that it is necessary to understand the heterogeneous ways in which young people perceive their environments if effective means are to be developed to foster their inclusion in urban governance. As he discusses, despite the relatively large proportion of Jamaica's population who are under eighteen, research on young people in Kingston has rarely afforded them an opportunity to express an independent voice on issues concerning their surroundings; rather, the literature has largely focused on teen pregnancy, youth crime, and other 'problem' behaviors. Drawing on surveys collected from young people in Kingston's schools which asked them to assess aspects of their environment with a series of semantic differentials (e.g. clean–dirty, healthy–unhealthy, and safe–dangerous), Dodman identifies both overall trends as well as differences in perception among young people based on gender, socio-economic status/place of residence, and place of birth, among other variables. While young people had generally positive perceptions of the microscale environments of their homes and schools, feelings about Kingston and Jamaica as a whole were far more complex and ambivalent. Although these findings are interesting in and of themselves, Dodman goes further by explicitly attempting to link these perceptions to young people's senses of agency regarding their ability to foster positive changes to their environments. As he shows, young people who seemed to have more positive views of their surroundings were also more likely to feel that individuals could actively contribute to solving environmental problems.

Young people's perceptions of place are also central to Pamela Wridt's analysis of

what she calls 'block politics' in an area of New York city which straddles the Yorkville and East Harlem neighborhoods. As she demonstrates, young people in her study area often have strong senses of belonging to particular blocks, and they engage in territorial practices which serve to construct both insiders and outsiders within these spaces. This sense of belonging to the block, however, has not been historically invariant. Rather, the scale of the block has itself been constructed differently over the course of the twentieth century, in part due to changes in both cultural norms and the physical landscape of the area. Wridt demonstrates this by drawing on data collected using what she calls environmental autobiographies, an approach which employs a mixture of methods to elicit people's memories and experiences of place. Her study involves youth participants (ages 11–13), as well as adults in their 30s and seniors in their 60s and 70s who lived in the community as children, allowing Wridt to explore both continuities and changes in the construction and experience of the block. Her work also challenges the widely held belief that public housing blocks are intrinsically alienating by documenting the ways in which a sense of community and inclusion has been produced in these New York neighborhoods.

While Wridt focuses on the scale of the block, Louise Holt and Kathryn Morris-Roberts locate their research in the institutional spaces of schools, which have become increasingly important sites for geographical research on children and young people. Both Holt and Morris-Roberts use rich ethnographic data to demonstrate the complex ways in which inclusions and exclusions are produced, reproduced and challenged in these spaces. Holt's research on the performance of dis-ability within a British primary school offers a crucial challenge to the sometimes overly simplistic formulations of inclusion that have been propounded in relation to children with mind-body differences. As Holt discusses, there is sometimes a perception that the simple practice of co-location (i.e. including children with mind-body differences in the same spaces as 'mainstream' children) will serve to break down the pervasive abled/dis-abled dualism, which operates in many societies. British schools have undergone a shift in policy over the last decade or so, as increasing numbers of students with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN) are being placed within mainstream rather than separate schools. The relative merits of this form of 'inclusion' are still actively debated, but Holt asks important questions about the ways in which dis-abled identity positionings are reproduced in ostensibly inclusive schools like the one she researched. Using participant observation and interview data, she illustrates the sometimes disturbing disjunctures between the rhetoric and actual practices of inclusive schools. Within the micro-spaces of individual classrooms, Holt observed differences in the extent to which children with mind–body differences are 'othered' through differential levels of praise and punishment, spatial arrangements, which tend to single out children who are thought to need special educational assistance, and the relative physical isolation of those with bodily differences. Importantly, however, Holt also recognizes how the children she studied sometimes actively challenge the identity positionings and representations fostered by more powerful adults in these institutional spaces. Ableist constructions of social difference were reproduced and resisted during interactions between children through practices of teasing, friendship, neglect, helping, and so on.

Morris-Robert's research participants are young women (ages 14–15) attending a comprehensive secondary school with a relatively diverse student body in a British city. Although young women have too often been treated by subcultural researchers as relatively silent and unimportant appendages to young men, Morris-Roberts (in common with other researchers in the growing field of girls' studies, which has only recently begun to have a greater influence in geography) insists that we take young women and

their friendships seriously if we are to understand the reproduction and contestation of British society's dominant heteronormativity. Drawing on data collected using a participatory approach that involved interviews, participant observation, and autophotography, Morris-Roberts focuses particularly on one friendship group referred to as the 'alternative girls' and the discourse of 'distinctive individuality' they invoke in producing their friendship—a discourse which also serves to exclude other young women from their circle. She illustrates the complex spatialities of young women's processes of (dis)identification (Skeggs 1997) as they move between a variety of in-school and out-of-school spaces. The creative appropriation of space is in fact a central part of their efforts to escape the surveillance of adults and the 'Townies' (primarily working class young women who are perceived by the 'alternative' girls as slavishly conforming to normative standards of femininity). As she shows, the alternative girls' processes of (dis)identification rely on the stereotyping of the 'Townies' as a singular, homogeneous group against which they can position themselves as distinctive individuals.

The issue of stereotyping also features prominently in the final two papers in the collection. Peter Hopkins and Caitlin Cahill address the experience of stereotyping in relation to groups of young people who have received comparatively little attention in the geographical literature to date, young Muslim men in Scotland and young urban women of color in New York City, respectively. The participants in both projects straddle the border between the conventionally understood categories adolescent and adult, and thus both papers contribute to addressing the imbalance that Valentine (2003, p. 39) sees in the existing literature, which to date has paid less attention to those 'on the cusp of childhood and adulthood' (ages 16–25) than to those of a younger age.

Using data from focus groups and individual interviews conducted in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Hopkins illustrates the complex dynamics of exclusion and inclusion at work in the lives of young Muslim men as they negotiate their religious, gendered, and national identities. These identity negotiations often occur within the context of harassment, name-calling, employment discrimination, and outright violence (such as in the case of the bombing of an Edinburgh mosque), practices which have seemingly intensified with the rising tide of European Islamaphobia in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. A number of Hopkins' participants also experienced a sense of dissonance when attempting to reconcile their desire to belong in Scotland with their personal religious beliefs and the mores of their family and community. In particular, young Muslim men often expressed a belief that what they sometimes stereotypically perceived as key markers of belonging in Scottish male youth culture (such as drinking, clubbing, and womanizing) conflicted with Islam. Although there are a number of broad commonalities Hopkins identifies in the experiences of his research participants, he also emphasizes the heterogeneity of the Muslim community in Scotland—a heterogeneity which young men felt was obscured by frequent media misrepresentations of Islam. Hopkins suggests that there is a pressing need for more sensitive and accurate media coverage of the Muslim community to mitigate the marginalization and exclusion of young Muslim men from Scottish public life.

In contrast, Cahill's co-researchers take on the task of re-educating the public themselves. Cahill's paper pushes the theoretical and methodological envelope by not only providing a sharp critique of exclusionary practices and stereotypes but also employing a methodology that seeks to foster social change. In the summer of 2002, Cahill and six young women of color (ages 16–22) living in the Lower East Side neighborhood of New York City formed a collective research team with the broad goal of developing 'a contextualized understanding' of young urban women's lives and experiences. To foster both collective insight and action, the meetings of the team

followed what she refers to as a 'feminist Freirian model'. Although their regular meetings were facilitated by Cahill, the six young researchers were given considerable input into the specific research questions, the methodological approach, and the dissemination of the research. Together, the team designed a project which examined the stereotypes propagated about young women from their communities by, among other sources, academic writings and charitable organizations which deploy representations of these young women as potential societal burdens.

Cahill documents the emotion fraught group process of identifying the pervasive stereotypes that circulate about young women of color, as well as the internalization of these stereotypes by the other young women the researchers spoke with and, indeed, by the researchers themselves. Part of the process also involved making connections between individual experiences and structural processes, such as when the young women began to identify links between their everyday struggles and the much written about cycles of disinvestment and gentrification which have affected the lower East Side. A sense of collective outrage developed among the researchers, and the challenge for the group was to not let anger and frustration disable them, but rather to use it to inspire themselves towards action. And act they did, as the young women developed, among other things, a website, a sticker campaign, and a report designed to raise consciousness and politicize others. Although qualitative researchers often suggest that methods such as individual or group interviewing can serve to empower members of socially excluded and stigmatized groups by 'giving them voice', Cahill challenges us as researchers to do far more.

Exclusionary and inclusionary practices structure young people's lived experiences of places. While all of the authors featured in this collection acknowledge the age-based marginalization of young people, they also call attention to the agency young people exercise in 'operat[ing] their own spatialisations' in the places they live, play, work and go to school (Jones, 2000, p. 37). These spatializations are constructed at scales including the nation, the city, the neighborhood, school, home, and the body. Young people challenge and reproduce wider narratives of social difference and construct their own local 'otherings', resulting in spaces that are comprised of differentiated and meaningful micro-territories where some young people feel comfortable and others do not belong.

Taken collectively, these papers also illustrate the value of inclusionary methodologies which ask us to reconsider the relationship between researchers and young research participants. In each instance, the researchers sought to place young people's perspectives and accounts of their lives at the center of the research project. This attentiveness to young people's own description of experience has been a hallmark of children's geographies research, and these papers attest to its continued vitality and importance.

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