33
GIVING BIRTH TO GEOGRAPHIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The importance of feminist geography beyond feminist geography

Ann E. Bartos

Introduction

Figuratively and discursively, throughout time and space, women and children have been conflated in policy, popular media, academic scholarship, everyday violence and geopolitical warfare. Cynthia Enloe referred to this as the ‘womenandchildren’ phenomenon, in which women and children are relegated to the private sphere and, therefore, are void of political agency, resulting in their similar states of ‘vulnerability’ (1990). Such vulnerabilities can also be pitted against one another in times when material or political resources are scarce: ‘womenandchildren’ can lead to a ‘woman versus children’ paradigm (e.g. Rosen and Twamley 2018; Twamley, Rosen and Mayall 2016). Rosen and Twamley (2018) suggest that the ‘woman–child’ problematic is important to unpack, because the ‘everyday entanglements of women and children … could add to the other’s understandings of the dynamic processes whereby inequalities are made, replicated and challenged’ (Rosen and Twamley 2018, 18). The authors suggest that, to better illuminate and untangle these relationships, scholarship on gender and age should focus on ‘looking in, looking out, looking back, widening the frame and breaking away’ (ibid., 12). This chapter heeds their suggestion to demonstrate that within the discipline of geography, feminist geographic scholarship has played a significant role in the development of geographies of children, youth and families (GCYF). I ‘look in, out and back’ within these two geographic subfields to highlight some specific insights that feminist geography has offered to research on young people.

In the following section, I provide a brief overview of feminist geography’s origins and the influence that it has had on the development of GCYF. Feminist geographers were pushing the boundaries of geographic knowledge production in the discipline in the 1980s to include the voices and experiences of those beyond the white, male, rational political actor; women and subaltern voices and perspectives were the keystones of feminist geography. It was soon after the introduction of gender and feminist issues into the discipline that attention began to be paid to some of the least-recognized knowledge producers at the time: children.
I trace these origins with the intention of highlighting points of connection between these two subdisciplines. Building on this brief historical overview, I then discuss three specific areas of research within GCYF that show evidence of feminist scholarship: the body, emotions, and care. The conclusion of this chapter ‘breaks away and widens the frame’ to consider other areas of inquiry informed by contemporary feminist geographic research and pertinent to GCYF.

**Feminist foundations of geographic research on youth**

The feminist geography flagship journal, *Gender, Place and Culture (GPC)*, celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2018. To honour this success, the journal focused on publishing its own history and, in the process, the history of feminist geographies (e.g. Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2017; Lynch 2018; Yeoh and Ruwanpura 2018). The journal’s inaugural year published two issues, in 1994, under the editorship of Liz Bondi and Mona Domosh. In the first paragraph of the journal’s first issue, Bondi and Domosh wrote:

To the pioneers of the 1970s, a journal devoted to feminist geography must have seemed a distant dream. Although the women’s liberation movement motivated many to take action in the streets, few dared to move that action into the halls of the academy. Yet feminist voices persisted and slowly gathered momentum. And from these modest yet courageous beginnings, feminist geography has now permeated most, if not all, corners of the discipline and has become a force that cannot be ignored in accounts of contemporary geographical knowledge.

At the time when Bondi and Domosh were writing about this disciplinary shift, prominent feminist geographers were already serving on editorial boards for top journals and holding faculty positions in geography departments (Bondi and Domosh 2003), and feminist analysis was becoming key to framing debates across the discipline (e.g. Dowler and Sharp 2001; England 2003; Rose 1993; Staeheli 1996). While it may not have been ‘normal’ to discuss ‘gender’ or ‘feminism’ (what Domosh referred to as the ‘f-word’ [Domosh and Ruwanpura 2017]), feminist geographers called attention to the subtle and overt ways that the discipline favoured and reproduced masculinist discourses of knowledge production. In other words, the foundations of feminist geography focused on power relations.

Inspired by poststructural and postmodern theories, feminists were interested in the ways that knowledge and power were inextricably related (Gibson-Graham 1994). Traditional (masculinist) notions of power focused on the ‘capacity to control or shape an event, person or process’ (Staeheli, Kofman and Peake 2004, 7). Feminist geographers worked with an expanded understanding of power to include attention to how it is ‘multifaceted, diffuse, and relational, even as it is understood that power is not equally distributed or always available in its different expressions’ (ibid., 8). This more amplified definition of power makes space for exploring power relations. Power relations are manifested in various ways through multiple sites and scales, such as nation states, institutions, bodies and discourses. Concerned about the power relations inherent in geographic discourse, feminist geographers exposed that some people, predominantly white, heterosexual and cis-gendered men set the agenda in the academy while others worked hard to revise the agenda toward more inclusivity (e.g. Domosh 1991; Massey 1991; Monk and Hanson 1982). Such scholarship was necessary...
Giving birth to geographies of young people

for researchers to convincingly argue for the value of including female and marginalized perspectives and politics into mainstream research and practice. Importantly, the more comprehensive and nuanced understandings of power relations were fundamental to the development of contemporary geographic research on children and youth (Aitken 2018; Holloway 2014; Tisdall and Punch 2012).

Prior to the poststructural turn, research on children in geography focused on their spatial cognition and map-reading abilities (e.g. Blaut and Stea 1971). Despite ‘the rather obvious point … that maps and everything they contain are referents to systems of power–knowledge’ (Aitken 2001, 49), early geographical research on children was not about power, per se. However, early studies on children’s mapping abilities laid the foundation for more theoretically informed research challenging traditional developmental psychological assumptions about children and youth at the time. Insights on children’s mapping abilities contradicted the assumed linear progression of childhood and adolescence in which significant ‘milestones’ determined ‘progress’ and ‘(ab)normalcy’; children demonstrated physical and intellectual capabilities through maps that rose beyond traditional developmental psychology metrics. In effect, these studies demonstrated that children and young people are important knowledge producers that, at the time, were essentially unbeknownst to traditional human geography.

Over the next few decades, the ‘new social studies of childhood’ (NSCC) influenced and catapulted further research into more critical and comprehensive geographies of children, youth and families.

In 2003, Children’s Geographies was launched. It marked a turning point in the discipline which ‘signal(led) that children’s geographies has finally “come of age”’ (Matthews 2003a, 5). The journal ‘sets out to unravel the complexities and ironies of childhood(s) and to challenge common (mis)conceptions conveniently perpetrated by the selective adult lens’ (Matthews 2003b: 147). Children’s Geographies and research across the discipline that focused on children and youth-based research was guided by the three basic (and interrelated) tenets of the NSCC: that children are beings in their own right; a recognition of the social construction of childhood(s); and that there is no universal ‘child’ or ‘childhood’. This new paradigm effectively reconceptualized childhood and paved the way for a wide array of qualitative (and frequently ethnographic) empirical studies aimed at providing and privileging the voices of children and young people.

Since the journal’s origins, geographic research on young people has expanded across the discipline (Robson, Horton and Kraftl 2013). A variety of geographers who engage with issues around children and youth publish in the top journals in the discipline (e.g. Ansell 2009; Hopkins et al. 2011; Krafl 2015; Ruddick 2003) and have produced key manuscripts (e.g. Aitken 2001; Hopkins 2010; Katz 2004) and edited texts with notable publishers on child/youth specific research (e.g. Ergler, Kearns and Witten 2017; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Holt 2010; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008; Skelton and Valentine 1998). While youth issues may not be at the forefront of all pressing questions across the discipline, it is not uncommon to find important and provocative research on children and youth within diverse fields such as urban geography, political geography, health geography and migration studies.

Despite the decade separating the seminal issues in GPC and Children’s Geographies, an overlap between these two subdisciplinary threads was apparent from their earliest publications, and this continues today. As discussed above, both feminist geography and GCYF view power as relational. This theme has been evident in various and overlapping ways over time. For example, GCYF and feminist geography share an interest in how space and scale are produced rather than accepted a priori. Individual bodies shape space and scale differently, and hence the everyday embodied experiences of place are important. Similarly, axes of difference are neither universal...
nor ‘natural’; difference is dynamic and contested. Therefore, both subdisciplines argued that notions of difference influence and impact on political agency, which challenges traditional approaches to formal politics and opens avenues for more inclusive and transgressive research. In the early issues of both journals, the focus on space, scale and difference were evident through empirical investigations around, for example, race, sexuality, the body, technology and urban and rural dynamics (e.g. Aitken and Marchant 2003; Beazley 2003; Bell et al. 1994; Jackson 1994; Jones, Williams and Fleuriot 2003; Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Longhurst 1995; Morris-Roberts 2004; Pratt and Hanson 1994; Vanderbeck and Dunckley 2003).

The brief histories of feminist geography and GCYF outlined above attempt to provide a window into their complementary relationship over time, as opposed to one of competition (c.f. Rosen and Twamley 2018; Twamley, Rosen and Mayall 2016). Attention to the important feminist geographic research occurring prior to, and in tandem with, the origins of GCYF provides insights into the foundations and research directions in geography around children, youth and their families. In the next section, I bring attention to three areas of research in GCYF that emerge from the application of feminist methods and theories to contexts of children and youth: research on the body, emotions, and care.

Feminist and youth research on bodies, emotions and care

Feminist research on bodies and embodiment has been central to the development of feminist geographies (Longhurst 1997). Feminists have played an important role in questioning the Cartesian duality between the mind and the body, and have legitimately argued that the body is a site of power relations. Therefore, the geographic scale of the body lends insights into place and space that disembodied territories or locations fail to recognize. Bodies are not universal, nor are they unproblematic. Bodies are sexed, raced, gendered and categorized in various ways that stratify society in both empowering and dangerous, or harmful, ways. For example, the problematic woman–child dyad that opened this chapter is further troubled through the lens of embodiment. In that dyad, at least one body, if not both, is erased and enfolded into the other. A focus on embodiment brings attention to the different spaces, scales and sites that both these bodies occupy and their ensuing agentic potential.

GCYF highlights that young people occupy liminal spaces beyond the radar of traditional research on youth, such as the playground or the home. However, exploring the various spatialities of young people through embodied relationships with place provides novel perspectives on, for example, identity formation, mundane political relations and geographies of inclusion and exclusion. In fact, Horton and Kraftl (2006) encouraged children’s geographers to provide ‘fresh and rich’ insights into the subfield through an explicit focus on the body and embodiment. Horschelmann and Colls (2010) provide a notable contribution with their edited collection to demonstrate that research on children and youth’s bodies needs to focus on young people’s imagination of what is possible in the context of wider social structures such as ethnicity, gender or class; on how youth embody and transgress deviance; and how young bodies are relationally situated to other bodies and, therefore, immersed in wider political relations.

In contrast to the erasure resulting from the women–child dyad, children’s bodies can be used as a trope in popular media and discourse. The child–body trope is evident particularly in discourses of risk: children’s and youth’s bodies are categorized as either at risk or risky (e.g. Pain 2004). For example, the child is both victim and perpetrator in their grim future, and these are narrated through specific bodies such as the starving child, the obese toddler, the teenage mother and the juvenile detainee (c.f. Aitken 2001; Katz 2017). Aitken argued that ‘what focuses
Giving birth to geographies of young people

the moral panics that surround the activities of children and youths are problematic social constructions of young people and the simultaneously disembodied and disembedded contexts of their lives’ (2001, 25). In such discursive projections, disembodied young people contradictorily lack agency yet remain somewhat responsible for their dire predicament. GCYF has made a concerted effort over the years to discount such misconceptions about children and youth with research that seeks to draw attention to the multiplicity, complexity and diversity of children’s embodied experiences of their life-worlds (Evans 2010; Herrera et al. 2009; Woodyer 2008).

Feminist geographies have also shaped an important trajectory in research on the relationship between place, space and emotions. Davidson, Bondi and Smith (2005) and others (e.g. Olson 2016; Pile 2010) developed a research agenda that took emotions seriously as a topic of inquiry. As the number of empirically rich case studies of children’s lives grew, Horton, Kraftl and Tucker (2008) made a strong argument that children’s geographers were well placed to contribute to the ‘emotional turn’; studying the emotional lives of children and young people seemed a logical extension to the vast trove of research on young people’s bodies and embodiment. Such investigations of young people’s everyday embodied and emotional engagements with place and space have offered new theoretical insights in the subfield and closely align with feminist geographies. For example, Holt et al. (2013) drew on Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu to discuss how children’s social relations are paramount to the development of their ‘emotional capital’. Bartos (2013) integrated Sara Ahmed’s work with traditional geographic research on ‘sense of place’ to better understand how children experience place through direct sensory engagements felt through their bodies. Blazek (2013) drew on psychoanalysis and the research of Anna Freud to unpack how children use a variety of ‘defence mechanisms’ to emotionally manage complicated entanglements between a child’s lived experience and her imagined realities. These and other studies attempt not only to prioritize the emotional lives of children and young people but to bring attention to the ways that, regardless of the life stage, emotions may reflect wider social relations and confluences than disembodied and non-emotional approaches to research.

Thirdly, feminist geographic insights have played a pivotal role in contemporary research on the intersections of care and young people. The traditional and problematic portrayal of women and children as the quintessential care-giving relationship inspired robust interdisciplinary feminist scholarship, aimed at challenging the presumed apolitical, non-confrontational, and ‘naturalness’ of such a relationship (e.g. Ruddick 1989). Feminist care theorists such as, Tronto (1993, 2013), Held (2006) and Robinson (2011), argue that while caring practices are performed by gendered and sexed bodies, these activities occur within a capitalist patriarchal society that fundamentally devalues care work and care providers. Therefore, research has focused on illuminating the many actors, spaces and scales at which care is given and received to expose how caring activities are necessary for our personal and collective survival.

A key issue across much geographic research on care is a focus on global care chains and the myriad actors responsible for, and often subservient in, Western frameworks of care provisions and practices (Raghuram, Madge and Noxolo 2009). However, Elizabeth Olson (2019) argues that such global care chains need to be reconceptualized with attention not only to gender, race, class and ethnicity but also to age. Her research illuminated how, historically, children caregivers have played and important role in curbing infant mortality and will remain key actors in the modern global economy. Similarly, in Ruth Evans’ research with young Sub-Saharan Africans and young African migrants in the UK, youth have been key caregivers.
not only for their own siblings but also for other family members, including HIV+ parents (Evans 2011, 2014; Evans and Thomas 2009). These studies and others (e.g. Horton and Pyer 2017; Robson 2004) illuminate the often hidden roles that young people play in caregiving relationships and how their experiences and practices of care are interrelated with wider economic geographies of social reproduction.

Beyond research on the practices of care, feminist research on care has expanded the ways in which we understand political relations. Feminist geographers have drawn on the insights of care theorists to argue that care challenges the dominant assumptions of the autonomous, self-made, masculine political subject (Brown 2003; Lawson 2007). Feminist research on the politics of care sheds light on how we are all interdependent and relational. All humans require care and all of us, at one time or another, will also provide care. Tronto (1993, 2013) has argued that this is fundamental to what it means to be human, and therefore should not continue to be ignored or denied.

Those studying children and youth have found the lens of care to be a particularly useful and important framework to bring attention to children's political subjectivities. As feminist care scholars have argued, caring is a political act, because it requires a fundamental reframing of how we understand power relations. In fact, while the context of care, caring practices and dominant caring actors are geographically specific, care, in general, is underappreciated and undervalued across the globe because of an incomprehensive understanding of how essential caring is to our individual and collective success (Raghuram 2016). When children are introduced into the conversation and understood as legitimate caring agents, as competent social actors capable of providing and also receiving care, their political potential is realized (e.g. Bartos 2012; Kallio and Bartos 2017; Olson 2019).

While feminist geographic insights on the body, emotions and care have been highly influential to GCYF research, it is also important to acknowledge that youth research on the body, emotions and care has the potential to give back to feminist geography. For example, research on the child-body and embodiment can offer nuance between the human and the nonhuman; Olson (2018) argues that when children’s bodies are the centre of popular discourse, their bodies are also deemed less than. This less than has implications for questions around responsibility and participation. Concomitantly, while children’s politics and political relations may be dismissed as unimportant or non-existent in traditional academic research or popular discourse, children and youth remain central to a wide variety of formal political decisions and policies, and are largely governed without their consent. Questioning where and how children’s politics are silenced can potentially illuminate and problematize the practices and approaches to building an effective social movement around, for example, sexual violence. Yet, this would require a commitment to revisiting some of the basic assumptions about what and who is worthy of citizenship (e.g. Staeheli et al. 2013). Such feminist geographic scholarship has inspired children and youth researchers with frameworks for investigating how politics develops and takes shape in young people’s lives, and the future implications of these politics (e.g. Kallio and Häkli 2016). Such insights can be shared back with feminist geographies, and can lead to new and fruitful inquiries made visible through the lens of youth.

The three themes raised in this section provide only a snapshot of some of the intersections between GCYF and feminist geographies. They are certainly not the only examples that I could have chosen to elaborate. Nonetheless, this brief account of the themes of embodiment, emotions and care demonstrates the important work that feminist geography offers to the discipline as a whole, not only to the subfield of GCYF. In the concluding section, I consider how ‘breaking away and widening the frame’ can help to identify some potential areas for expansion.
Conclusion

This chapter 'looked in, out and back' at the fields of feminist geography and GCYF to highlight their complementary relationship over time (c.f. Rosen and Twamley 2018). Both subdisciplines demonstrate the value and importance of exploring and exposing the voices and experiences of subaltern and other disadvantaged actors to academic discourse. This commitment builds on a recognition that power and knowledge are deeply interrelated and immersed in a wide array of (often) unequal relationships. Both feminist and GCYF geographers bring attention to such relationships to offer new insights into more traditionally (masculine) approaches to human geography, which tended to ignore the context that age, gender identity and other axes of difference offer to the construction of knowledge. The birth of Gender, Place and Culture and Children's Geographies, in 1994 and 2003 respectively, continue to grow and flourish, a testament to the importance of both subdisciplines to geography.

Looking in, out and back provided a lens to explore how the feminist topics of embodiment, emotions and care have informed some GCYF research. For example, both subfields have raised interesting questions around the politics of research, representation and methods; issues of sexuality; the intersections between the human and the nonhuman in relation to agency; and the significance of intersectionality as method, theory and practice. While I do not suggest that all children and youth geographers are feminists, and I acknowledge the apprehension of academic labels (e.g. Holloway 2014), it is shortsighted to imagine academic knowledge as arising in silos. Rather, a cross-pollination of ideas, people, discourses and arguments is necessary for academic knowledge to expand, develop and stretch boundaries. I have suggested that feminist geographic insights have been invaluable to the development of research in geography on children, youth and their families. Other scholars may wish to draw out the intersections between GCYF with other important geographic subfields such as urban geography, health geography, political geography and development geography.

Rosen and Twamley (2018) suggest that 'widening the frame and breaking away' are two further vantage points for scholars to interrogate the relationships between gender and age-based research. Scholarship that 'widens the frame' could include research that incorporates the people and places tangentially to the intended research participants, for instance, women and children. Research from this vantage point would include those who do not identify as 'woman', or people beyond a young person's immediate surroundings. Importantly, both feminist and youth geographers are already engaged with this vantage point. For example, from the early issues of GPC, men and masculinity were understood as legitimate actors and topics of investigation within feminist geographic research (e.g. Bell et al. 1994). Similarly, insights on children’s agency as not only beings but also as becomings required attention to their wider social, cultural and economic relationships (e.g. Katz 2004).

Finally, 'breaking away' includes:

- the possibility of becoming otherwise in ways which dismantle not only the [woman-child] binary but subject positions and power relations altogether. […] to jettison both femininity and childhood as well as their dualisms: masculinity and adulthood […] to do away with historically sedimented categories and their differential privileges.

Rosen and Twamley 2018, 13–14

In order to ‘break away’ effectively, more focus is needed on exploring the power imbalances that undergird and maintain oppressions, regardless of age or gender. For example, feminist geographies and GCYF have gained insights from critical race scholarship and the importance of an intersectionality and anti-essentialism approach: a recognition that there are no universal
categories of identity and that our various experiences of oppression are not transferrable to other bodies. ‘Breaking away’ encourages scholarship that dismantles the power relations that enable patriarchy, racism and capitalism to persist and to structure society in disempowering ways for both women and children, especially as they embody other bases of oppression (Grillo 1995). Feminist geographies and GCYF research on intersectionality will be an important area of inquiry for all future critical research in these subfields (Hopkins 2018; Johnston 2018; Konstantoni and Emejulu 2017; Mollett and Faria 2018; Rodó-de-Zárate 2017). Focusing on intersectionality has the potential to revisit and reframe current debates within both subfields, and will continue to push the boundaries of academic knowledge production in ways that remain focused on the fundamental theme that guided the origins of both feminist and youth geographies: the relevance of the interconnections between people, place, power and knowledge.

**Key readings**


**References**


Giving birth to geographies of young people


Giving birth to geographies of young people


