Exploring Space and Politics with Children: A Geosocial Methodological Approach to Studying Experiential Worlds

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Abstract
The chapter introduces a methodological approach that the author has developed for the empirical and analytical exploration of children’s geosocial worlds. It builds on a threefold conceptual baseline: political subjectivity as a human capacity, topological polis as a relational context of living, and the political referring to subjectively experienced and socially shared, contextually forming matters of importance. These three interrelated starting points provide the theoretical ground and its methodological framework for exploring the worlds where children lead their lives, from their perspectives and with them, through spatially embedded narrations that unveil situated and contextual truths. For empirical inquiry, I have operationalized the geosocial approach into three analytical layers, focusing on social, spatial, and political relationalities. The chapter describes the methodological approach, including a theoretical introduction and a thorough

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© Springer International Publishing AG, part of Springer Nature 2018
A. Cutter-Mackenzie et al. (eds.), Research Handbook on Childhoodnature, Springer International Handbooks of Education,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51949-4_125-2
explanation of the geosocial analytical means, and empirical illustrations that inform a politicized notion of childhoodnature. It concludes with recommendations for ongoing methodological inquiry into children’s social and environmental worlds and further theorization of the geosocialities of childhoodnature, as limited by the empirical contexts informing this chapter.

**Keywords**

Geosocial · Experienced space · Topology · Spatial methodologies · Children · Relational space · Political subject

**Introduction**

Recent scholarship in human geography and the neighboring disciplines emphasizes spatial relationality. The shift to relationality contrasts with the more conventional approaches of nested spatial scales and territorial structuration. Scalar perspectives — framed in terms of micro–macro, proximate–distant, local–global, urban–rural, national–transnational — have not ceased to exist. Since the late 1990s, several “competing theoretical accounts concerning the nature of scales as social constructs ranging from an idea or metaphor functioning as an epistemological ordering frame (e.g., Jones, 1998) to the more materially embedded question of reach in strategic networking (e.g., Brenner, 2001)” have emerged (Häkli, 2018, p. 272). This still ongoing debate has engendered different branches of thought on relational spatialities where attention is given to the “interconnections and mutual constitution of socio-spatial relations and processes,” observed by Jessop et al. (2008), “social and material entities are seen as assembled in ways that cannot be captured by scalar geometries,” as promoted by Marston, Jones, and Woodward (2005), and “the co-presence of particular spatialities but also their co-implication” are emphasized, as in Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto (2008) (Häkli ibid.). This development is of keen interest and relevance to the contemporary study of childhood spatialities, as indicated in the recent special issues of the journal *Global Studies of Childhood* (Millei, 2014, 2015).

As part of these broad discussions that have engaged some childhood and youth geographers as well (Kallio & Häkli, 2015; Kallio & Mills, 2016), topological theorization has been introduced as one potential way of rethinking how spatial relations constitute and exist (e.g., Joronen, 2016; Martin & Secor, 2014; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012). Instead of identifying new territorial frameworks or scalar dimensions, topologies are attained by tracing the social ties that people, including children – as individual agents and collective actors – adopt, create, maintain, transform, challenge, and refuse, as part of their everyday activities, through their interactions and relations developing and unfolding in various lived environments (e.g., Ahlqvist, 2013; Ek, 2006; Häkli, 2018; Lorimer, 2010; Sepp, 2012). The relational realms thus exposed are not static constellations as they constantly transform through people’s practiced relations. Neither are they completely fluid realities where nothing holds its place, as “geosocial life” is conditioned by established
spatial structures with geopolitical and geoeconomic underpinnings (Mitchell and Kallio 2017). Moreover, geosocialities involve interaction with natural, material, and immaterial elements, as part of the ongoing constellation of lived realities that people experience and enact diversely (Johnson et al., 2014).

Joining this branch of research, in collaboration with Jouni Hääkli, I have developed a theoretical idea of “topological polis” (Hääkli & Kallio, 2014a, b, 2016; Kallio & Hääkli, 2017). As part of this work, I have created a methodological approach for exploring people’s geosocial worlds, primarily from the perspectives of 10–17-year-old children and youth, as I have been working with them in my recent research in Southern Finland and Northern England. This chapter focuses on introducing the methodological approach and showing how it can be operationalized in empirical research.

I begin with a brief theoretical introduction, explaining the key concepts informing the methodology and its philosophical orientation. Then I turn to discussing the analytical means and illustrate them with examples from my ongoing analysis. Before the summarizing conclusions, I ponder on what the approach may offer to the interdisciplinary study of childhood studies, and in the final section modest suggestions for the childhood studies research agenda are given.

Publications demonstrating the methodological approach through empirical analysis include Kallio (2014a, b, 2016a, b, 2017a, b). Portions of this chapter also appeared in author’s previous publications that are referenced throughout this chapter. These include Kallio, Hääkli, and Bäcklund (2015) and Kallio (2018, forthcoming), as in the list of references.

Theoretical Grounds of Geosocial Methodology

The geosocial methodological approach that I have developed builds around the theorization of political agency (Hääkli & Kallio, 2014a, 2018a, 2018b; Kallio & Hääkli, 2011a, b, 2017). This section offers a brief introduction to the key concepts: subjectivity as human becoming–being, contextuality in the form of topological polis, and the political denoting matters of subjective and shared importance.

Following a phenomenological orientation, I understand political agency as a human condition providing people capacities to lead their lives as political subjects. This includes that political agency is conditioned but not predetermined by socially constituted (inter)subjectivities, that is, the social selves that people acquire when becoming members of the communities and societies in which they are situated. Secondly, the phenomenological orientation emphasizes experience as a focal element of political subjectivity, and specifically, human experience as a particular way of relating to lived realities. Philosophically and ontologically, the approach stands in contrast with the posthumanist and new materialist thinking where the dissolution or dispersion of human subjectivity is taken as a starting point (for a thorough critique, see Chernilo, 2017; Hääkli, 2017; James, 2017; Payne, 2016; Rekret, 2016; van Ingen, 2016). Rather than understanding agency as distributed between human and nonhuman actors, I deem that different actors have different kinds of
agencies that may have political ramifications. Human agency, however, involves specific political characteristics that should not be lost from the sight at the childhood nature research agenda. As I will discuss next, children among other people can form and express attitudes, advance their desires, present views and disagree, and take action in ways unforeseeable and unexpected, by drawing from their socially conditioned, intersubjectively developing, and subjectively established political subjectivities.

With subjectivity, I refer to the experiential dimensions of selfhood: who I feel I am. This “whoness” is a constantly developing human state of becoming. It builds in relation to negotiated identities: what I am in terms of race, gender, class, age, ethnicity, and other social categories. These conceptual starting points draw from Arendtian political philosophy (Arendt, 1958, 2005, also Kallio, 2014b, c, 2017a). The idea of becoming indicates the dynamic processes of subject formation, in line with theories of subjectivity that appreciate it as an intersubjective process based on mutual recognition, including importantly political and ethical elements (e.g., Cornell & Murphy, 2002; Crossley, 2001; Honneth, 1995; Noble, 2009). In this Hegelian sense, subjects depend on mutual recognition to exist as individuated selves. Hence, the mundane situations where recognition is given and received—and sometimes struggled over—are concurrently the source of personal agency and the foundation of sociality.

While subject formation is an ongoing process, continuing throughout the life course, it is particularly intense during the early years of life (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012; Habashi, 2017) and in significant turning points, like life course transitions related to migration, for instance (e.g., Kivistö & La Vecchia-Mikkola, 2015; Peña & Ybarra, 2017), and societal and personal crisis (e.g., Baines, 2015; Väyrynen, 2014). However, it is important to note that, as a subjective human condition, “becoming political” is not oppositional to “being political.” Because intersubjective subject formation requires the active presence of the subject, becoming unquestionably includes being. As part of political development, or subject formation, people take part in their own processes of becoming as well as in those of others within their social reach, both implicitly and explicitly. When transitioning through intensive periods of intersubjective geosocialization—as I have come to call the contextual processes of political subject formation (Kallio 2016c, 2017a, 2018)—people are hence not less “whole” or “present” than during more stable periods of life, as subjects and active agents. Thus, being always includes the potential of becoming; by being with others (including more and less active presence), people enhance their political subjectivities intentionally and less so. Childhood and youth researchers, in particular, have emphasized the importance of noticing these aspects, to stress the equality of children and young people with other people in their communities and societies (for an overview, see Prout 2011).

The second key dimension of political agency is contextuality that I frame in terms of “topological polis,” which notably diverges from the classical city-state idea of polis (for a thorough description, see Häkli & Kallio, 2014a; Kallio & Häkli, 2017). In short, the concept refers to the relational realms where people find themselves living. Following topological logics, polis is a geosocially constituting
reality, consisting of everything that has meaning to those involved in its life. Respectively, these meanings are definitive of its scope and extent. Due to its social constitution, *polis* can never be described accurately in topographical terms. Its form and contents vary depending on where, when, and from whose perspectives they are approached. Similarly, its temporalities are blurred; *polises* do not rise and fall similarly to polities. As “a specific ‘shape of space’, that operates by different rules of connectivity and transformation than, say, a plane or a sphere” (Martin & Secor, 2014, p. 433), topological *polis* is constantly in transformation. Different *polises* cross over and mold each other, forming new political realities at some points, in some places, with some people. This kind of subjectively experienced yet intersubjectively practiced spatiality is outlined already in Arendt’s conception of *polis* (Arendt, 2005, p. 128, emphasis in original):

[S]omething that is shared by many people, lies between them, showing itself differently to each and comprehensibly only to the extent that many people can talk about it and exchange their opinions and perspectives with one another, over against another.

Even if the emergence of topological *polis* does not follow a singular spatial logic (e.g., territoriality, network, or flatness) and has no stable or general condition, it does not constitute randomly or change haphazardly. *Polis* is known, practiced, and struggled by the people who are experientially involved in its geosocialities and whose agencies are conditioned by the prevailing geopolitical and geoeconomic situations (cf. Hörschelmann and Reich, 2017; Sparke, 2017). Its constituents are brought together by matters that gain importance in its life – that are politicized in a given realm. Moreover, my thinking includes that while the nonhuman constituents of *polis* may be influential in many ways, only people are capable of initiating politicization as that requires abilities to experience and share contextual importance (cf. Häkli, 2017). These capacities, embedded in political subjectivity – the condition of possibility of political agency – are central in human political agency.

The concept of *polis* already hints that, in this theoretical framework, the third major concept, “the political,” is employed on a relational political–theoretical basis, along with pragmatist and phenomenological philosophical lines of thought (e.g., Barnett, 2012; Dikeç, 2013; Simonsen, 2013). As political, I consider matters that people identify and define as particularly important in their lived worlds, i.e., *polises*. This means that politics never exists in abstracto; things are always political to “someone,” living somewhere in a specific time, and hence, to become political, “anything” needs to be politicized (Kallio, 2017a). Similarly, things may lose their political significance as they cease to be considered particularly important in a given context (albeit they may still be called “politics” or “policy”).

Potential to politicization arises when something starts to appear as particularly important to someone(s) who, personally or collectively, find this matter undervalued or misunderstood in their lived worlds. To gain the contextual importance needed for politicization beyond individual subjects, these experiences have to be shared with other people, which may include implicit and explicit forms of sharing on broader or smaller scales. Placed in the topological *polis* and informed
by the intersubjective conception of political subjects, this idea of sharing reformulates Arendt’s (1958, p. 179) concept of “speech” by which people “show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”

Put together, the theoretical approach informing geosocial methodologies, as I have developed them, holds that the experiences constitutive of politics are primarily subjective but political life exists only through social practices. What stands as political in a given time and place is understood, negotiated, and struggled by the people involved in a certain geosocial reality, as becoming–beings whose political subjectivities shape up through mutual recognition. The topological polises where these lives are led are conditioned by large-scale geopolitical and geoeconomic forces that mobilize in various forms in people’s everyday living environments. In this framework political agency is, on one hand, a contextual process through which people come to be recognized as political subjects and potential actors in their communities. Concurrently, people influence the constitution of polises from their personal stances, together with their significant others, by participating in mundane political life. Thus, political agency is thoroughly contextual and socially embedded while relying on people’s subjective capacities to experience their lived realities.

These starting points provide a theoretical ground for exploring existing political worlds from the experiential perspectives of, among others, children and young people, who are active participants in topological polises. The second part of the paper delves deeper into the geosocial methodologies as developed in my recent research with children and youth, opening up the analytical potential embedded in this approach and illustrating how it can be used in empirical research.

**Analyzing Topologies**

To begin with, I wish to emphasize that I have developed geosocial methodologies to create an approach that would allow and provide for the empirical study of topological space, not as a theoretical exercise only that tends to serve mostly scholarly debates. Therefore, the empirically oriented approach involves simplifications and formulations that can easily be questioned on a philosophical level; it is nothing but a still imperfect and evolving methodology. Further empirical and conceptual work is thus required to theoretically develop geosocial methodologies, a challenge I return to in the last part of the chapter.

As topological space constitutes through social processes and mutual recognition, the first step in topological empirical inquiry is to learn about people’s social lives and their experienced identities. Second, as topological polis configures as a spatial relationality, people’s experiences and understandings about places, locations, sites, events, cultures, histories, and discourses need to be related analytically in ways not predetermined by topographical imaginaries. Third, as the political in my thinking refers to matters politicized in polis by the people involved, the political dimensions of topological space have to be traced from people’s experiential
knowledges and agencies. These three analytical steps, or layers, are opened up in the next sections, including empirical examples from my ongoing research with 10–12- and 14–17-year-old English (n = 134) and Finnish (n = 128) school children (hereafter referred to as participants).

All names used in the analysis are pseudonyms, and where necessary, the participants’ identities are protected by changing minor details from their biographies. Fieldwork in Finland was carried out with Elina Stenvall. Fieldwork in England was carried out by Marie Avril Berthet and Roger Hart and facilitated by the University of Leeds Geography Department.

**Entering Geosocial Worlds: Social Analytical Layer**

At the first stage of geosocial analysis, social relations are identified as entry points to people’s existential lived worlds, leaning on a phenomenologically oriented perspective. In our everyday lives, we create long-lasting relationships with our significant others, have fleeting encounters with strangers, and connect indirectly with distant others. Additionally, social relations may involve explicit information exchange, like teaching at school, information transmission through media, and knowledge sharing in informal situations. In the intersubjective processes of “geosocialization,” also these factual pieces of knowledge turn into experiential understandings (cf. Mitchell and Elwood 2013 on Stiegler). Through social relations, people learn what the world seems to be like, how they and other people seem situated and related in it, and which matters seem more interesting and important than other matters.

This “seemingness” does not refer to doubtfulness or falsity, quite the contrary. As Arendt (2005, p. 128) emphasizes, “no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world always shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective, which corresponds to his standpoint in the world and is determined by it”. Moreover, Foucault (2003, pp. 7–8) stresses the importance of noticing, particularly, “naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity,” as they may propose critical counter perspectives to dominating truths. The perceptions and understanding that children acquire often fall, indeed, within the remit of such disqualifed knowledges (Kallio, 2012, 2017c).

In my recent studies, I have used a mapping exercise to identify children’s key social relations. The reason for using mapping platforms, based on Google Maps, is that I needed to locate their lifeworlds somehow with them, in the first place, to start making sense of the topologies of their polises. Even if the topographical spatiality that the mapping platforms manifest is exactly what is being deconstructed in topological theorization and analysis, they provided a good starting point for fieldwork. Finnish and English children are familiar with these maps, as spatial representations, which made it relatively easy for them to start portraying their social worlds on them. The deconstruction of topographical spatiality took place already
during the fieldwork, as we discussed their markings in relaxed interviews and continued throughout the analysis (discussed in the next section).

In practice, the young participants were provided with six mapping platforms, representing (1) the neighborhood around their school, (2) the city where their school was located, (3) the region around the city, (4) the country where the fieldwork was done, (5) Europe and its bordering regions, and (6) the world. By using felt pens and post-it stamps, with three colors (green=positive, red=negative, yellow=neutral), they marked roughly on the maps things that are important, interesting, or merely existing in their lived worlds. After this, we talked individually with each participant about their experienced worlds, beginning from the markings that they had made yet expanding from them to various directions (more about this in the next sections). After the interviews, the participants could write stories, draw pictures, or portray their experiential knowledge in other formats, to complete the “narrative biographies” that they co-produced in the study with us.

The research practice followed child-centered methods throughout as applicable in the research contexts (Lagström, Pösö, Rutanen, & Vehkalahti, 2010), emphasizing especially the participants’ rights to determine what aspects of their lives may be included in the study (for details see Kallio, 2012, 2017a). The interviews were conducted in the format of relaxed chats, in places such as the school library, and the power relations between the researchers and the participants were determinately reduced during them and in all fieldwork. We did not introduce themes of our own liking into the discussions unless there was a clear hint in the child’s narrative about such matters. For example, if the child expressed concerns for environmental issues, we asked about environmental hazards; or if she/he mentioned changing social relations, we felt that it was okay to bring into discussion themes such as caring agency and diverging ethical stances. In a critical ethnographic spirit, I regard the research materials as “partial truths” affected by the situatedness of knowledge and the positionality of the researchers and the participants (e.g., Rose, 1997). As mentioned above, they were co-produced by the involved researchers and the participants and only as such should the materials be analyzed, as specific portrayals of the participating children’s lived worlds.

The social analytical layer of geosocial analysis aims at accessing the lived reality of another person, which is always a particular world even if shared with many others in a number of regards. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that the researchers doing fieldwork seek to keep a distance between their own worldviews and those being traced with the participants. Disengagement from normative assumptions is important at this phase of the research (I return to this point in the political layer.). As an example of a particularly challenging case in this regard, consider the piece of analysis based on Rasmus’ biography (for an extended analysis, see Kallio, 2016b). Rasmus is a 12-year-old boy living in a middle-class area in Tampere, one of the bigger cities in Finland. In the mapping exercise preceding the interviews, we had noticed his provocative way of expressing political thoughts, which made us anxious about working with him. Figure 1 portrays Rasmus’ map of Europe on which he has made three markings. Finland is colored green (positive) and specified as “the best country ☺,” as is the case on many children’s maps (73 green markings out of
122 markings in the Finnish sub-study). Russia is colored red (negative) and accompanied with a double label of “I hate.” This attitude was not unexceptional on our Finnish participants’ maps (37 red markings on Russia and hardly any with other colors). Yet Rasmus’ annotations on Germany are one of a kind. The country is colored green with the explanation: “helped in the war against Russia.” The text is accompanied by an established image titled “Hitler” and two swastikas.

Prior to the interview, we expected that Rasmus wanted to annoy us by presenting things he knew to be inappropriate, perhaps to test our tolerance or to withdraw voluntarily from the study (which happened with some other participants). Yet he was very happy to participate and talk about his world and perspectives. We subsequently discussed his map of Europe:

*Interviewer:* You have a green mark on Germany, what do you think about it?
*Rasmus:* Well I think it is a fine country and then it is good in the sense that it helped Finland in the wars, and so on.

*Interviewer:* What do you think war is about? Why must wars be fought?
*Rasmus:* Well of course they shouldn’t be fought but, well, countries help each other if someone is at war, for instance in an unfair . . . Like if the other country is way bigger than the other; just like Russia against Finland, when Germany came to help.
This excerpt reveals that Rasmus had taken the exercise very seriously. Following the instructions, he portrayed the world as it appears to him. He wanted to tell us that Finland is where his heart resides, with Russia as its overpowering enemy and Germany as its long-term friend. His way of conveying this was nothing but fanatic. As we discussed further his interest in guns, war games, the army, and hobbies involving war-type features, it became evermore evident that he was not intrigued by violence and did not idealize fascist or other politically oriented movements. Instead, amiable relations with family and friends took center stage in our discussions.

It would be easy to render Rasmus’ understanding about the relations between Finland, Russia, and Germany as childish and incomplete and thus disqualify it as knowledge, to use Foucauldian terminology (cf. feminist geopolitics perspectives such as Massaro & Williams, 2013). Such a reading includes the assumption that, with time, he will develop more sophisticated interpretations of these international relations, as he learns what the history between these nation-states really is like and how much this violent history should affect the way we think about their relations today. While this may be a fair assumption, it is not very fruitful in understanding his geosocial reality in the present. Another possibility is to approach his ideas through the world where he lives, the topological polis that forms a multifaceted context of his political development and agency.

This is just one example, among others, from my research indicating the importance of learning about experiential spatiality first through social analysis and only after that through spatial and political lenses. In Rasmus’ biography, state relations appear comparable with personal relations, and in both cases, he considers taking the side of the disadvantaged and weaker as righteous. Similarly, yet using completely different examples, many of the participants talked about their close relatives and friends vis-a-vis other people and actors whom they knew, to stress their understanding about fairness and inequalities (Kallio, 2018).

As a second example, from the English sub-study, I present Mukhtar’s biography to demonstrate how the social layer can be used in this methodology, from a different perspective (for an extended analysis, see Kallio, 2018). Mukhtar, an 11th grade student, described his familial relations as a portrayal of experienced geosociality with clear geopolitical ramifications (Fig. 2). In this case, also, we sought to put aside our own understandings about transnational migration and refugeeness and the politics of war in the British–Afghanistan context, to be able to understand how social relations were shaping Mukhtar’s understanding about the world in which he lives.

Challenging life situations are rarely merely individual even if they are personally experienced. Mukhtar’s biography provides one example of how political agency may be developed when one’s personal situation is not contested; instead, at stake is his family broadly understood. Mukhtar, currently living in England, is from Afghanistan and has family there, but in Germany and Denmark as well. He has visited all these homes over the years and goes to Afghanistan yearly. Seeing how differently people live and take social positions, especially regarding familial relations, has led him to form strong opinions about richness–poverty,
privilege–vulnerability, and ignorance–empathy. Mukhtar has no respect for his well-off German relatives whom he describes as:

Arrogant, ignorant, they don’t take other people’s advice on board, they think they’re upper class but they’re not [...] don’t have an idea of what goes on around the world, they don’t understand poverty. I mean in my family we really focus on charity, but they just spend it on other things, pointless things.

In Denmark, Mukhtar has had quite different experiences:

The way people, the Danish people treat each other is really good. They treat each other equally. It’s all equal, yeah, it’s really good. They help the poor as well. I’ve never seen anyone arrogant up there.

This again is in vast contrast with his conception of the English:

People here are just selfish. Like, I’m not being judgemental or anything, but there’s a lot of people who are arrogant, ignorant.

In later stages of the analysis, I have identified that Mukhtar’s political agency is strongly connected with his familial identity, guided by an empathic understanding about people’s differing positions and their interconnectedness across countries. He is developing political agency through these shared global relations that seem to strengthen, concurrently, his critical awareness and categorical, if not ethnocentric, attitudes. This analysis – making visible key facets in Mukhtar’s topological world
and how things are politicized – was possible only by engaging with his biography through the social analytical layer in the first place.

In conclusion, the social analytical dimension of geosocial methodology provides the entryway to the empirical study of people’s existing topological realities, or *polises*. At this stage of research, the aim is to identify key social relations by which people, and in the context of this study, children, engage in their lived realities as political subjects. Through the processes of intersubjective socialization, based on mutual recognition and including the active presence of political subjects as being–becomings, children learn about their political realities in particular ways, including tacit and explicit ways of knowing. The social analytical layer also allows a preliminary analysis that paves the way to the next analytical phases, focusing specifically on the topological spatialities of geosociality and the political aspects of these relational worlds.

**Identifying Spatial Relationality: Spatial Analytical Layer**

In my ongoing analysis, based on the research materials created with English and Finnish young participants, I am seeking to understand how spatiality existed to them at the time of the fieldwork and how they positioned themselves and others in their experienced realities. To avoid simplifying and reducing these children’s worlds into fixed constellations, I have studied their manifold spatial relations without an attempt to create uniform descriptions or figures. In fact, topological portrayals are always patchy and scattered even if they involve some continuities and established formations – ambiguity and equivocality is their fundamental character. They include networks and disconnections, stable and flickering points, pile up matters that have seemingly nothing in common, and separate things that may first appear as parts of one system – to mention just a few characteristics of the topological narratives that, in my research, are actually products of “unmapping.”

What I have done, beginning from the child-led interviews and continuing throughout the analysis, is releasing children’s narrations from the topographies of the maps and identifying instead socially embedded spatial connections and disconnections from their biographies. A couple of examples from Finnish 11-year-old girls’ biographies serve as apt examples of how this analytical phase may unfold (see also Kallio et al., 2015).

In the mapping exercise, one of the girls had placed her aunts’ home in the city-scale map. During the interview, she drew straight parallels with this place and some odd locations in Spain (shared vacation), Paris (the aunt’s previous home), and Eastern Finland (family-owned summerhouse). Having thus portrayed how one of the important social dimensions in her world actualizes spatially, she then connected this “life with the dear aunt” with other strands that, we learned, crisscrossed her mapping platforms (e.g., other relatives, trips, locations, etc.). Without our in-depth discussion with her – and led by her – the markings would have remained separate and the topological connections between them imperceptible. If following topographic cartography, we would have seen, instead, merely spots in different cities,
countries, and continents that seem to be connected by physical proximity and distance only.

Another example can be found from the biographies of two circles of friends who were selectively enacting the mediated transnational world in the creation of an “us” (for geographies of friendship, see Korkiamäki & Kallio, 2017; for mediated realities, see Kallio, 2017b). This involved, first, bringing together elements from various divergent sources, including scalar multiplicity (e.g., TV series, family practices, school peer communities, hobbies, travels, role-playing games, popular music scene, cartoons, sports events, etc.), and second, embedding these elements in their everyday practices by transforming them to serve the friends’ own ends. The created “we are us” embraced and looked like a chameleonic spatial assemblage taking different shapes in space and time. “Hot topics” and “looks” embraced by these circles of friends could alter even between our fieldwork periods. Yet this did not endanger the socially recognized existence of the group in the school community, which reveals its established nature. In topological analysis, it is essential to identify both of these dimensions: transformation and continuity intertwined.

As these examples illustrate, in geosocial methodology the spatial analytical layer stands for the identification of socially constituted spatial relations. In the previous examples, familial and peer relations lie at the heart of topological constitution, which obviously are among the most important social connections in many children’s lives. Less case-specific perspectives can be achieved by analyzing common practices among the participants, tourism, for instance. Even if they may involve the same people – primarily family but also friends – other elements surface from the context.

In both of my sub-studies, the participants talked extensively about their travels to different geographical locations and social settings, be these short trips to close-by destinations (e.g., spending a weekend in a holiday resort, traveling with a sport team to tournaments held in other cities on Sundays, visiting friends and family), field trips with school (to rural, urban, and foreign destinations), various kinds of family holidays (including visits with relatives living abroad), as well as traveling with a friend and her/his family as a “kith family member” (on familial relations, see Kallio, 2016a). These descriptions draw attention to many kinds of topological elements, from the travels but also beyond them: for instance, how development and tourism are bound together through various relations (e.g., Saarinen, 2016) or how touristic experiences shape young people’s worldviews when shared with friends, relatives, and broadly through social networks (Rinne & Kallio, 2017). I give a couple of examples from my study.

In the English study, places like Skegness and Blackpool were regularly mentioned. Both are well-known seaside resorts in Northern England, commonly visited by families over the weekend and during holidays (including families with various socioeconomic backgrounds). One of the older girls, Alana, told about her affectionate relationship with Blackpool. The significance of this place in her world became evident particularly through an essay, accompanied by a drawing, which she created after the mapping exercise and our interview with her (Fig. 3). To Alana, Blackpool is connected with some dramatic familial events occurring after the
Blackpool

During the summer holidays 2012, my family and I took a weekend break to Blackpool for a surprise visit. On the 28th August 2012 it was my Grandad and Gran's 50th wedding anniversary, so without them knowing we joined them on their trip to Blackpool. Although Blackpool isn’t the most glamorous place to visit, it contains special memories from many years ago.

Over the course of the weekend, we laughed & really enjoyed ourselves. Never for once did I imagine this to be my last family break with my Dad’s family, unfortunately I was wrong...

Although we had a weekend packed with great memories: Madame, Tussauds, taking over the hotel with the amount that travelled, spending endless hours on the karaoke, etc. However, my favourite time was going to the Pleasure Beach. Each day was filled with unforgettable memories.

After we got home, we were informed with some dreadful news – cancer. From that moment I understood that Blackpool was the last place to contain holiday memories. However, I will treasure them forever. Blackpool will always be a special place to me as my Granca will always be with me, even though he isn’t actually.
holiday: the grandfather’s deathly sickness that put an end to shared times with her
dad’s family. This gave a special meaning to the joyful moments she had experienced
with her family in Blackpool, lending the whole city a special place in her world.

With another girl, Phoenix, belonging to the group of younger participants, we
talked about Skegness that she had visited with her family a couple of years ago, to
be exact with her grandparents and sister. She considered the trip “my first holiday”
and thus gave it great value, introducing Skegness as a place “w[h]ere dreams come
ture” (Fig. 4). In this case, similarly to the previous one, the experiences offered by
the resort gained special significance as they were shared with the family and with
grandparents and sibling in particular.

Many comparable examples can be found in my research materials, related to
touristic towns in the Mediterranean and amusement parks in bigger cities, for
instance. Together they portray a topological space that, regardless of where the
actual places are located, provides children access to an inverse reality: a space
dominated by childhood. In this “childish space,” if you like, time and money are
used primarily for doing enjoyable things together, and serious matters are playfully
pushed aside or “suspended.” The environments are organized accordingly:
opportunities to being together are emphasized instead of providing children, youth, adults, and seniors separate services and places of dwelling, as typically is the case in urban space. Playing, fooling around, and engaging in fun activities are essential, as well as eating not-so-proper foodstuff at wrong times of the day, not to mention purchasing silly items that may seem out of place when taken at home. These are all part of the “amusing ordinary” where children’s agencies and knowledges receive respect, unlike in many everyday environments dominated by adultness. Children are thinking and doing it right as they indulge and often lead the adults, into these playful worlds.

Quite a different dimension of the topologies of tourism can be identified through a narrative from another English girl, tenth grader Ikshita, who told about her relationship with Portugal. Her family is scattered around the world, and she has rare possibilities to meet her relatives, even if they keep regular contact through Skype and other social media applications. Once, the whole family had come together in Portugal, for a shared holiday. This had had a tremendous effect on her

![Fig. 4 Phoenix's experiential Skegness](image)
perception of anything Portuguese: she loved the food, the nature, the culture, the people, etc. These experiences can of course be interpreted through the familial analytical lens, like those above. Yet, in this case, it is particularly fruitful to look into the geoeconomic and geopolitical underpinnings of her experiences and the following spatial perceptions.

In Portugal, the family was spending time in conditions specifically designed for enjoyment and relaxation, as is the case in Blackpool and Skegness. However, the family that came together in the Portuguese hotel, from all around the world, had particularly good resources to accomplish the holiday, including economic, cultural, and geopolitical resources, which stands in contrast with the previous examples. These conditions had allowed for them smooth opportunities to creating a pleasant and unforgettable experience that entwined the fabulous Portugal into their family history. The people responsible for tourist industry in the country and the broader region, or the resources offered to their use by various local and transnational actors, did not appear to the girl as elements enabling or conditioning the experience. Thus, she did not realize that many women had to choose between taking care of her and her own children during their stay (e.g., Costa et al., 2017) or that the people preparing seafood for them in the restaurant at an affordable price could be struggling with their own livelihood (e.g., Carneiro, Portugal, & Varejão, 2014). Neither did she need to meet challenges with language, as the people working in the transnational tourist industry in the Mediterranean learn English to serve the Anglophonic tourist.

These kinds of touristic experiences are often emotionally strong and thus very influential in political subject formation. Through them, children learn about their positions in the world. These implicit understandings include placing other people with reference to oneself and one’s kind, and in the case of Western tourists, this often means fulfilling less privileged subject positions. As the critical understanding about the conditions of tourism is often ill-fitting with enjoyable touristic experiences, these mundane knowledges usually remain beyond deliberation, even if they may lead to unease in certain situations (e.g., feeling anxious when meeting people who live on the street). This way children’s subjective experiences, shared with significant others such as family members, enhance their processes of geosocialization where, among other things, transnational inequities naturalize into the state of affairs. In the discussed case, love toward Portugal is built, not only through caring familial relations but also as based on the geoeconomic and geopolitical unbalance between tourists and the people enabling their enjoyment. Hence, topologies of tourism do not turn innocent while involving children; rather global inequalities are continued in these encounters.

In this section, I have illustrated the spatial layer of geosocial methodologies through the help of some empirical examples. I want to stress that the analyses included here are only examples; media and hobbies, for instance, offer alternative perspectives to youthful topologies (Kallio, 2017b). As an analytical strategy, topological analysis includes, first, unmapping children’s experiences from territorial attachments to socially established relations and, second, reframing them through topological spatialities that allow various kinds of overlapping and (dis)
connected realities to exist simultaneously. The topological *polises* that thus start to become visible are at the same time subjective and shared, conditioned and conditioning, sustainable and transformable, and include mobile as well as enduring human, nonhuman, and more-than-human elements. What becomes politicized in these lived realities depends on the social practices of the people involved, i.e., what matters appear as particularly significant and generate activities with potential to change or struggle. Next, I will turn to the political dimensions of geosociality that have been mentioned already in this and the previous section, yet the analytical dimension itself remains undiscussed.

**Exploring Political Realities from Subjective Perspectives: Political Analytical Layer**

“Political layer” is the third analytical dimension of the geosocial methodological approach that I am developing in my research. In this phase of analysis, the topologies revealed through the spatial layer are scrutinized by paying attention to moments of attentiveness and, further, to the oriented stances, articulated attitudes, purposive activities, and intentional actions potentially growing from these experiences. Heightened attentiveness concerning any matter can be analyzed: events taking place near or far; things appearing suddenly or emerging from familiar things; current, past, or future activities; personal or public concerns; inspiring, oppressive, interesting, or boring happenings; and so on. The aim of this analytical move is to understand, from subjective perspectives, how the world is and becomes political to the people whose lived realities – or *polises* – are being analyzed.

Sometimes identifying political dimensions from biographical narratives, or from any qualitative research materials, is relatively easy. Consider the examples that I gave in the section introducing the social analytical layer, including themes such as racism, fascism, state relations, forced migration, socioeconomic differences and class, and violent conflicts and societies in war. Yet in situations where personal or collective challenges are not related to matters already broadly politicized, the geosocial analysis requires a particularly strong emphasis on the political layer. Here, specifically, disengagement from normative assumptions is important, which means keeping actively a distance between one’s own political ideas and those brought up by the participants (cf. Rasmus’ biography).

Bullying is one theme that came up many times in both sub-studies (See also Häkli and Kallio, 2018a). It offers a context where “the political” emerges from various kinds of mundane contexts, thus serving as a good example for illustrating what the political analytical phase is about. While sharing many features of racism, the difference lies in the reasons of harassment. Race is a socially established, broadly politicized contextual identity that one cannot choose. It appears as a significant element of most *polises*, existing in the form of subject positions that people encounter through the dynamic processes of mutual recognition. As one of the older boys in the English study, with a Nigerian family background, declared, it was clear to him why he was being treated badly in his school: in the North England
In my life, there have been moments that I’ll never forget. Good ones and bad ones. But the most memorable moment was when my cat was put down. I had just got home from school and I found out that my mum had taken my cat Haru to the vets as she wasn’t well. She had cancer. At that moment I knew there was nothing we could do but let her go as peacefully as possible because she was already in so much pain. I found out the same day I had fallen out with two of my closest friends.

It was two days before my birthday. We all said goodbye and I was overwhelmed with sadness. It had to be the worst day of my life. We drove to the vets in Barnsley, and I held the cat carrier on my lap, she wouldn’t stop meowing and it just made everything worse. I had to say goodbye to my cat. The cat I had owned for 5 years, she was my friend, part of my family. Once we were in the vets I couldn’t breathe, it was like a nightmare that just wouldn’t end. The vet took her in and injected her with the overdose of anaesthetic. As she went to sleep, she meowed one last time and then her tongue was sticking out as she went. I will never forget that moment. Seeing her face like that, it just made everything seem hopeless.

This experience changed my life so much. People bullied me because my cat had cancer, people made fun of me. I tried to ignore them but it never worked. I became enclosed, I hid in my room most of the time and I rarely spoke to anyone anymore. I had learnt to stick up for myself after this. I decided I had had enough of the people who bullied me or made fun of me, and because of that I am the person I am today. It changed me forever.

Fig. 5 Emma’s experiences of bullying as a form of mundane political struggle
mystery: envy was the only reason he could think of for not being accepted. Therefore, he kept on trying to join in the group while constantly suffering from disapproval.

In Sara’s school days, bullying was present more explicitly; even we could see how she was openly mocked during the breaks. Yet Sara had found a reason to why it happened and, based on this understanding, was prepared to correct the situation in the future. As it often goes in highly individualized cultures, she had found the problem from herself. She explained to us that she had “performed herself in a wrong way from the start,” creating a role too different from those of other girls. The solution she had come up with was, hence, to wait until the seventh grade when she could move to a school where no one knows her and “perform herself better” so that people would like her more. Similarly, Anton was thinking about a fresh start in a different school environment.

These examples, picked from among many others, show how learning about the importance of equality in communal life may happen in relation to non-politicized matters as well. In Anton’s case, the alarmed awareness toward bullying had led to professional plans: he was determined to become a police officer so that he could help others. He considered the responsibility of authorities to prevent and improve inequalities as the best response. Anton was already practicing this agency in a hobby where mutual respect and fair leadership are the leading principles (Kallio, 2017a). Sara, instead, had learned that people’s opportunities to building identities and forming agency differ between social environments (Häkli & Kallio, 2018a). With her family, in the world of music, and in her circus hobby, she was recognized as a completely different person than in school. In these social contexts, she could perform comfortable identities that made her feel respected for who (sic) she feels she is (cf. Arendt on who/what, p. xx). In her next school, she hoped to be able to accomplish the agency developed in these contexts and thus find her place in the new school community. In her case, the process of political subject formation seemed to combine aspects of Foucauldian self-care and deCerteauian ruse: transforming without yielding up (cf. Kallio, 2008). Thirdly, Emma, whose caring agency for her cat had led to bullying, felt that she had strengthened as a person due to these experiences, which would help her later in life in situations where people might try to put her down.

The participants in my study shared many experiences related to situations or trajectories by which they had learned about the importance of equality, as a social element as well as a democratic principle. More often than not, encountering inequalities had made them attentive to this or that matter, while existing equal relations and practices had not often raised similar attentiveness. After becoming attentive toward certain inequalities, many children and young people develop attitudes and agencies led by the Arendtian understanding of humanity: to be a member of a democratic community is to act as an equal.

Equality is one theme through which mundane processes of politicization can be traced in empirical research with children. Other dimensions, pertinent particularly
to the scholarship introduced in this volume, are children’s amiable and concerned relations with their living environments and natural elements they know about and care for. In my recent study, the Finnish participants talked more about their takes on environmental issues. Many of them had become attentive toward pollution in their neighborhoods and on a broader scale (especially water systems, e.g., local lakes and Baltic Sea politics), environmental threats (related to nuclear power for instance, e.g., Fukushima disaster), urban green as an important yet sometimes endangered element of everyday living (e.g., privatization developments), and values related to wild nature.

One reason why such concerns may be closer to Finnish than English children’s hearts can be found from the tradition of mökkeily, literally translated as “cottaging.” It is a traditional way of spending free time outside the city, especially during summer holidays but also on weekends throughout the year. Finnish cottages are typically located in the woods by the water (lake, sea, or river), and they range from simple huts with no electricity or running water to full-scale all-season villas. They are often family-owned, including shared ownerships between different generations and siblings. In addition to these, resort-oriented tourism industry offers a broad range of cottages for short- and long-term rental (Kulusjärvi, 2016). Characteristic activities include sauna, swimming, sun bathing, barbecue, berry and mushroom picking, fishing and hunting – and most importantly, spending time together with the family in the “natural peace and quiet.”

In contrast to the UK, where having these kinds of second homes at the countryside are considered luxurious and affordable only for people in privileged positions, in Finland the division of life between urban and rural dwelling is not so much a question of class (Hiltunen & Rehunen, 2014). More than half of the population has access to a second home, and many families are involved in cottaging activities in various locations. Similar activities are often included in school fieldtrips, municipal and congregational youth and social work programs, hobbies, and other recreational happenings. According to my findings, this lifestyle seems an important trigger to children’s relationships with wild nature that, thus, intertwine with their familial relationships and mundane politics. The tradition of cottaging fosters what Bartos and Wood (2017) call “ecological well-being,” which leads to mundane but sometimes also more formal practices of political agency – “green citizenship” at large (Wood & Kallio, forthcoming).

To sum up, by bringing the understanding emerging from the political analytical layer together with the findings coming from social and spatial analytic phases, geosocial analysis creates understanding about how topological realities, or polises, establish and on the other hand, what kinds of experiential processes people go through as they make sense of the political worlds where they find themselves living. This attempt, while being rather challenging, seeks to provide alternative knowledge about the spatial relations that condition and enable political life in the largely topographically organized societies and communities where children, among other people, live.
The geosocial methodological approach introduced in this chapter draws from phenomenologically oriented theorization where the experiences constitutive of politics are considered primarily subjective and political life is seen to exist through social practices. What stands as political in this framework are matters signified, understood, negotiated, and struggled by the people who, as members of lived political communities, are involved in shared and contextual geosocial dynamics and practices. The relational worlds, or topological *polises*, where these lives are led are conditioned by large-scale geopolitical and geoeconomic forces that mobilize in various forms in people’s everyday living environments. Political subject formation is, thus, a contextual process through which people come to be recognized as political subjects and potential actors in their experienced worlds. Concurrently, people may influence the constitution of their political realities from personal stances, more and less intentionally, by participating in mundane and formal political life together with their significant others. In all, the geosocial methodological approach highlights political agency as thoroughly contextual and socially embedded while relying on people’s subjective capacities to experience their lived worlds.

To serve empirical research, theoretically informed methodological approaches, such as the one discussed here, need to be operationalized into analytical means. In my recent study with children and youth, I have used three analytical layers to access, conceptualize, and analyze their experienced political realities. Following the relational ideals of the geosocial methodological approach, these dimensions emphasize:

1. **Social relatedness** as the primary foundation enabling people’s spatial–political experiences as well as their knowledge-building regarding their socially constituting worlds (*polis*) and themselves as their recognized members (*intersubjective being–becoming*).
2. **Topological relationality** that regards the multifaceted contextuality of political life, where entirely different kinds of spatial relations may exist concurrently to the people involved in the life of a *polis* (e.g., territorial, networked, place-based, translocal, mediated, connective, emotive).
3. **Experience-based politics** where “the political” stands for those elements of *polis* that are first recognized as particularly important within its sphere, then negotiated, contested, and struggled by the people (who thus act as *political being–becomings*), and finally but only sometimes established as long-standing cornerstones of the everyday life of a given political reality (e.g., politicized identities, institutionalized practices, public administrative structures).

Through these analytical means, it is possible to trace political worlds as they appear to the people involved in a given political life, regardless of their societal skills and knowledge or generational positions and age. In practical terms, I have used mapping platforms to provide entry points for children to tell about their
experienced worlds and to share their understandings with researchers. Through discussions, as well as writings and drawings, I have then followed up the social relations and positions significant to these children, to understand their personal stances in the polis that they are portraying as lived space. From the narrative materials thus produced, I have unmapped their experienced realities, by identifying different kinds of spatial configurations. Concurrently, I have paid attention to their emerging political subjectivities and agencies that, at times, became visible as children talked about events, situations, activities, people, and feelings of particular importance. The pieces of narrative where something seemed to be “at stake” to the speaker proved most fruitful in this regard (e.g., experienced inequalities, environmental concerns).

How I see that the geosocial methodological approach contributes to existing methodologies in human geography and childhood studies is twofold. First, it begins from the idea that in every case, political reality is subjectively experienced and socially constituted and, thus, cannot be known from beyond the people involved in a given political life. This starting point brings a “third leg to the stool” (Mitchell and Kallio 2017, p. 5), complementing methodologies where large-scale geopolitical and geoeconomic frames are used to explain political life in a specific empirical context (e.g., Moisio & Paasi, 2013, cf. Millei, 2014, 2015). Moreover, it adds to feminist approaches that appreciate microscale analysis yet often set politicized identity categories, such as gender, race, and class (e.g., Massaro & Williams, 2013), or politicized contexts, such as militarism, migration, and activism (Benwell & Hopkins, 2015), at the heart of inquiry or as analytical presumptions. In the geosocial approach, all matters important in people’s lives are seen as potentially political while considering none as inherently political.

The second dimension that I consider novel in this approach may be of particular interest to childhood researchers, including childhoodnature scholars. Argumentation for acknowledging children’s knowledges in parallel with adult knowledges has prevailed for a long time, yet it remains that they are not, in several regards (Kallio, 2017c, cf. Harris & Wyn, 2010; Wood, 2017). Geosocial approach may be helpful in partly overcoming this continuing inconvenience. It does not distinguish between adults’ and children’s ways of knowing but, rather, argues for the subjectivity and contextuality of all spatial and political knowledge. The only truths that this approach admits are the mutual and discordant understandings that people share and juxtapose through social practices in the polis, as they recognize and are recognized by each other and as they act according to their beliefs and ethics. Politicization may take place in any situation where people contest the prevailing order or suggest new entries to the social fabric. This often occurs as the identities imposed on us in the mundane and institutional practices of everyday life do not seem fitting or when some events involve injustices that people do not want to accept. Thus, from a geosocial perspective, children can be seen as active players in the processes of politicization, just as adults. For example, as they do not adjust to roles offered to them by institutional authorities (like teachers) and mundane communities (like neighborhoods), or do not agree with the moralities (like regarding suitable appearance) and rules (like appropriate use of public space) of their living
environments, they bring forth critical knowledges that open up space for contestation and change. This agency can be found interesting, among other things, as a form of “green citizenship” (Wood & Kallio, forthcoming).

As to the limitations of geosocial methodologies, what I have developed thus far is just one starting point for creating a means to empirical topological inquiry. Some of the unresolved questions are, for one, how to bring together experience-based spatial–political knowledge from many individuals, which is needed in creating a better understanding about the emergence and continuity of polises as shared political spaces. Another important element, still completely missing, is topological representation. I have not yet found a way to “remap” or otherwise represent topological polises in other but narrative formats. Third, as people’s spatial–political experiences are conditioned by geopolitical and geoeconomic frameworks, these should be taken into closer consideration when thinking further the analytical means. This includes dealing with the fact that, like other truths, geopolitical and geoeconomic understanding are based on geosocially formed knowledges. They are created, shared, agreed upon, and circulated by certain quarters, in some polises, and scientific discussions play an important role in these processes as one form of legitimization. How can we relate geopolitical and geoeconomic understandings, always biased, with other geosocial knowledges without emphasizing the already existing power relations that condition our lives? These questions, among others, deserve attention from researchers who are interested in developing further geosocial and related methodologies.

**Conclusion**

The childhoodnature research agenda fosters the building and sustaining of lasting relationships with environments including a variety of living things and argues for the joint efforts of people in achieving this, be they young or old, parents or sons/daughters, teachers or pupils, caretakers or those being taken care of. Children’s ways of conceiving, interpreting, knowing, sharing, and acting are not juxtaposed with those of older people yet neither are they – or perhaps in my opinion, should not be – identified as specific forms of knowledge with unforeseeable potential. Rather, I think that children’s knowledges – and I talk about knowledges in a broad, Foucauldian sense – are largely part of the societies and environments where people live with each other, and they persist in the dynamic relations between human and nonhuman elements and actors. It may be, however, that these knowledges are not typically identified as such and they do not receive due attention and appreciation. Children’s agencies often fold into the fabric of everyday living as seemingly naturalized elements of social life.

Bartos and Wood’s (2017) conception of ecological well-being is one productive way of identifying and supporting children’s relationships with their environments, always involving social and natural elements. Their concept highlights interconnectedness between children’s different roles in their mundane and institutional environments, competing power relations conditioning children’s lives, and children’s
active agency in upholding and creating well-being for themselves and others. What the political geographically grounded methodologies introduced in this chapter may add to the ecological well-being approach, and have to offer to the childhoodnature research agenda more broadly, are:

1. **Recognition as the key dynamism of political life.** Regardless of their generational positions and chronological age, people are political being–becomings who may influence each other by means of (ethical) recognition. Children play an important part in the intergenerational chains of recognition, both as political subjects under formation and as presently active political agents.

2. **Children live in a relational world.** Even if people’s abilities to self-governing physical mobility may expand by age, the worlds in which children find themselves living are not constituted in a scalar manner (from micro to macro). Children’s understandings about their lived realities, constantly transforming, form through social relations and engagements. In the contemporary world of intensifying transnational and translocal developments, this means that children’s experienced worlds involve various overlapping and even contradictory, spatial relations and configurations that direct and impact on their agencies.

3. **Political life is shared and subjective.** Political elements of human life are specific and contextual; what grows to be politically significant in a given community or society depends on which matters and principles the people involved consider particularly important. During the early years, people are socialized into their political realities, yet they are not completely subjected by the prevailing conditions as even young children have capacities to relate with their social worlds and to act in contravening ways. By practicing this human agency, children can participate in political meaning-making processes and the related negotiations and struggles of politicization, as individual persons and together with other people.

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