

An 8-year old Child's Understanding and Relationship with Nature

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Abstract

Current research shows that children's play-environments have drastically changed from past years. Using Vygotsky's *Social Constructivist* theory, the purpose of this research study is to find out how a child relates and understands nature in this current, fast-pace society. Research questions include *how does the child relate to nature?* And *how does the child perceive nature?* To collect data, the *Mosaic Approach* was adopted: searching for nature-related photographs on the internet, followed by an interview. *Content analysis* and the participant's rationalizations for the photographs were recorded as field notes. Results showed that the participant expressed positive feelings towards nature, yet, disregarding humans as being a part of nature. Media and other social influences were shown to impact the participant's perception of the future state of nature. The participant expressed fearful attitudes of pollution and although having a limited definition of the term *Global Warming*, she has emphasized the harsh impacts that the world will face in the future. Although living in a technologically -advanced society, the participant still showed a strong relationship with nature.

Introduction

•Research has shown that children's play-environments have drastically changed in the modern societies. Television, video games, computers and other media influences are now beginning to play the dominant role in a child's development, further disconnecting them from the natural world (Bonnett & Williams, 1998).

Research Purpose

To investigate, directly from a child's perspective, their relationship with nature in this current, fast-pace society.

Research Questions

1. How does the child relate to nature?
2. How does the child perceive nature?

Participant

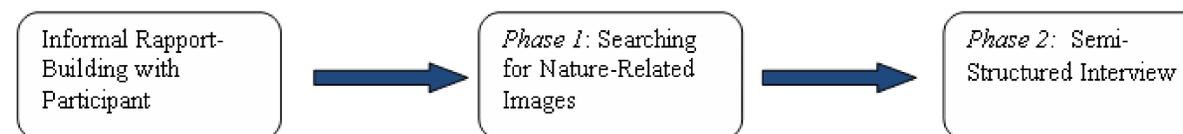
An 8-year old girl living in a suburban environment ; Purposeful sampling was used in order to obtain a participant, in which a close-friend's younger sister was contacted

Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's *Social Constructivist* theory was used as the theoretical underpinning of this research study. In this theory, children's learning is believed to be a product of social interactions and the surrounding environment, or in other words, a *social phenomena* (Gardner & Kosmitzki, 2008).

Method

- In order to gather insightful data, the *Mosaic Approach* was adopted where data is drawn from a multi-method approach to provide insightful results (Clark & Moss, 2004).
- The process took place at the child's home for 40 to 45 minutes in total.
- Two phases: 1. searching for nature-related photographs on the internet; 2. A semi-structured interview which was tape-recorded and transcribed.



Building a Rapport with the Participant

- Although having already known the child, time was set aside to have informal conversation with both the mother and daughter about daily events while sitting at the kitchen table.
- Once settled, the research topic was explained, as well as answering any questions and reviewing the consent forms.
- The child was given the choice of where the interview would take place. A comfortable, familiar setting was chosen by the child, which was the family's computer room – a place where the child spends most of her time in.

Phase 1: Searching for Nature- Related Images

- Using a photo-gallery website entitled *Flickr (flickr.com)*, the process began by encouraging the child to search through internet photographs that represented: *The 'ideal' natural environment and how nature will look like in a hundred years*
- It is important for the researcher to avoid assuming what the child defines as "fun." By having an already established relationship with the child beforehand as well as directly asking the child, the researcher knew that the participant would enjoy using her computer. The participant provided an explanation of each photograph and field notes were being taken.

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interview

- A comfortable place was chosen by the participant to conduct the second phase of data collection: a semi-structured interview
- The participant was encouraged to play with the recording device and listen to her own voice. The semi-structured interview constituted of a combination of open and closed-ended questions, which lasted approximately 30 minutes.
- Closed-ended questions will serve as a warm-up for the child to fully engage in the interview process (Irwin & Johnson, 2005).

Analysing

- Content Analysis* was used in order to analyse transcriptions of interview; The participant's rationalizations were recorded as field notes and descriptions of the photos were presented in the findings.
- Member Checking* was used afterwards where the researcher telephoned the participant to illustrate findings and clarify responses

Validity and Reliability

- Mosaic Approach* provides an in-depth and reflexive analysis which ensures validity of the research results which provides an adequate range of possibilities (Clark & Moss, 2004; Morrow, 2005).
- Member checking* was completed for the participant to extend on rationalizations, as well as approve the final analysis

Results

Definitions and Feelings associated with Nature

- Did not believe that humans are a part of nature
- "Nature vs. Humans" mentality
- Positive perceptions towards nature; identified words including "colourful" and "alive" in image descriptions as well as in the interview.

Child's Relationship towards Nature

- Was extremely enthusiastic about playing outdoors
- Opposed to solitary play, the participant associated her friends with the outdoors.

Environmental Problems

- Fears towards the future state of nature
- Participant discussed her understandings of *Global Warming* and the harmful effects that humans are causing on earth
- As shown in the images, the future state of nature included man-made buildings, filled with grey smoke and factories.

The perfect picture of Nature →
Nature in a 100 Years ↓



References

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Conclusion

Findings illustrated that although the participant is living in a technological-advanced society, she still has positive perceptions towards nature. Spending frequent time outdoors and having an enthusiastic attitude about playing outdoors indicates that the participant closely relates to the natural environment. However, research findings also unexpectedly reveal that the participant is fearful of the future state of nature and human beings. As this case-study presented, conducting research with children gives the opportunity for children to gain a strong voice, and become empowered. This indeed is crucial in our current society.