

Eßer, Florian; Jäde, Sylvia; Heyde, Judith von der
Intragenerational ontopolitics and stunt scooters. Doing childhood in public urban spaces

Childhood : a global journal of child research 31 (2024) 4, S. 572-587



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Eßer, Florian; Jäde, Sylvia; Heyde, Judith von der: Intragenerational ontopolitics and stunt scooters. Doing childhood in public urban spaces - In: *Childhood : a global journal of child research* 31 (2024) 4, S. 572-587 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-363245 - DOI: 10.25656/01:36324;
10.1177/09075682241288969

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-363245>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:36324>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Dieses Dokument steht unter folgender Creative Commons-Lizenz:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de> - Sie dürfen das Werk bzw. den Inhalt vervielfältigen, verbreiten und öffentlich zugänglich machen sowie Abwandlungen und Bearbeitungen des Werkes bzw. Inhaltes anfertigen, solange Sie den Namen des Autors/Rechteinhabers in der von ihm festgelegten Weise nennen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use

This document is published under following Creative Commons-License:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en> - You may copy, distribute and render this document accessible, make adaptations of this work or its contents accessible to the public as long as you attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.



Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der


Leibniz-Gemeinschaft



Intragenerational ontopolitics and stunt scooters: Doing childhood in public urban spaces

Childhood
2024, Vol. 31(4) 572–587
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/09075682241288969
journals.sagepub.com/home/chd



Florian Eßer  and **Sylvia Jäde** 

University of Osnabrück, Germany

Judith von der Heyde

University of Applied Science, Germany

Abstract

In the article we discuss the ‘re-inhabitation’ of public spaces by children and young people in Germany who ride scooters on a skate park. In addition to the generational difference between children and adults, the importance of intragenerational relations amongst scooter riders is also revealed when it comes to legitimizing access to and exclusion from the skatepark. With an ontopolitical perspective, the significance of generational order and ordering in relation to processes of zoning in public space can be analyzed.

Keywords

Ethnography, generation, ontopolitics, public spaces, zoning

Introduction

The question of childhood spaces has become a crucial focus of Childhood Studies as well as Children’s Geographies (e.g., [Holloway et al., 2019](#)). This article picks up at this point, asking from an actor-centric perspective how children and young people appropriate public urban spaces. To investigate this question, we use the example of riding stunt scooters as an emerging trend sport. Children and young people who take part in this sport must negotiate available resources with other actors in limited public spaces. Based on a relational approach to agency ([Eßer, 2016](#); [Oswell, 2016](#)), we assume that the opportunities for children and young people to appropriate spaces result from the specific local

Corresponding author:

Florian Eßer, Institut für Erziehungswissenschaft, University of Osnabrück, Arndtstraße 32, 49078 Osnabrück, Germany.

Email: florian.esser@uni-osnabrueck.de

conditions and actors and are therefore inherently political. A key dimension of this is generational order, which has been fundamental for Childhood Studies from the outset (Alanen, 2009). Besides the vital role of *intergenerational* differences between children and adults, the empirical analysis also shows how important the emphasis of *intra-generational* affiliations (Punch, 2020) are between children and young people.

This article therefore aims to highlight the production of generational belonging as the result of local and situational practices that are political in that they are related to other processes of generational ordering which enable certain ways of being for children and young people while inhibiting others. In the following, we will therefore explore the following questions: (1) How should spacing and ‘zoning’ be analysed beyond a binary adult-child difference; (2) what political processes of generational ordering can be observed against this background; and (3) what consequences arise from this for ‘generation’ as a term that goes beyond the binary coding typically found in Childhood Studies?

After a theoretical introduction to ‘zoning’ and the governance of public spaces, the article turns to the skate park as a location of generational conflicts. First the case is outlined before a focus is placed on reconstructing generational order as a part of a ‘policy of zoning’ using empirical examples. This is followed by an analytical classification of the analyses while relating them to generational politics that take place both within and outside of binary-generational orders. The article ends with a conclusion in which we argue for analysing generational politics beyond binary generational differences, which currently still builds the common ground of Childhood Studies.

Intragenerational (onto-)politics in public spaces

We tie into current calls for a political understanding of childhood as formulated from numerous perspectives (e.g., Alanen et al., 2015; Lee and Motzkau, 2011; Spyrou, 2018). Generational politics can be located and analysed on various levels: for example generational conflicts are evident when it comes to macroeconomic issues of resource distribution (e.g., taking on public debt) or questions of ecological justice (e.g., the Friday for Futures movement). Even though they appear much ‘smaller’ compared to these kinds of ‘large’ national or even global issues (Jacobs, 2006), skate parks that are the focus of this article also represent the result of generational conflicts in the generational order on the one hand, and on the other are themselves spaces of generational politics.

Childhood and (onto-)politics

Here we understand the term ‘politics’ as it was developed in Science and Technology Studies (STS) by Bruno Latour (1999), for example. STS can be situated within the broader context of Posthumanist (Braidotti, 2013), New Materialist (Barad, 2007) and post-anthropocentric (Haraway, 2016) scholarship which has strongly influenced Childhood Studies and Children’s Geographies during the past decade (Krafl and Horton, 2018). In vain of the so called ‘New Wave of Childhood Studies’ (Ryan, 2011)¹ researchers seek to overcome established binaries between the biological and the social by for example analysing how children are ‘made’ socio-biologically different from adults

(Lee and Motzkau, 2011) or engage with the material world (Kraftl et al., 2022) and animals (Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020). Häkli and Kallio (2014) have also argued for an understanding of the political which is linked to mundane processes of subjectification. They describe how the individual self is made by subjectively relating to its social surroundings and so shift “the relationality of ‘the political’ from within the individual into the social world” (Häkli and Kallio, 2014: 191). Häkli and Kallio basically argue against the interactionist understanding of Mead (1934) and analyse how the social context enables and restricts different individual modes of being.

Taking these considerations further from a posthuman STS tradition we seek to reconstruct the assemblages and networks in which ‘the child’ is produced as a fluid and ambiguous entity that affects the agency of children. John Law and especially Annemarie Mol have accentuated such an understanding of politics in STS. Law and Mol (2008a) draw their understanding of politics in differentiation to classic understandings from political theory in which politics is typically viewed as discourse. They take up a view of politics as described in the context of STS: Here, even material objects have a political co-actorship: speed bumps (also known as ‘hidden police officers’) on streets regulate traffic, for example, by forcing drivers to slow down. Law and Mol (2008a) accept this perspective but criticize the conceptualisation of politics as too unidirectional in that individual objects are assumed to have a simple effect on human actions. As an alternative, they present a concept of politics in which materialities are relevant while focusing on the different and alternative possibilities of being that result from them (Law and Mol, 2008a: 135). In this understanding, politics are something that both divide and unite the world. When we examine the skate park as a result of zoning practices (Dirks et al., 2016), this is precisely what we mean: Children, young people, and their practices are separated from other public spaces and yet come together in the park.

Mol (1999, 2013) directs particular attention to the processes that she designates as ontopolitics. Here she draws on the ‘turn to ontology’ in STS (Woolgar and Lezaun, 2013). This perspective emphasizes how the essence of things that are typically viewed as stable and given only arise when various actors interact. This means that dynamics and relationality assume the place of stability and essentialism. The political aspect is that alternative ways of being become imaginable and can be lived out, thereby becoming political because they are open to an assessment of being ‘better’ or ‘worse’ (Mol, 2013: 381).

When we take up Mol’s concept of ontopolitics, we therefore also link it to more recent discussions in Childhood Studies that point to the plurality of modern childhood(s) (Balagopalan, 2014). In this vein the concept of ontonorms was already been picked up occasionally (Cardell and Lindgren, 2024; Eßer, 2017; Spyrou, 2017): If one looks at the ontological status of ‘child’ as the result of ontopolitics, then the critique of a universalistic concept of childhood (Liebel, 2020) can be related to the concept of ‘being a child’ itself. Not only the question of *which* child becomes an actor is the result of socially embedded situational production processes, but also the one of *whether* that person is considered a child or not. In accordance with STS, this production or emergence will not be examined primarily as discursive but as a material phenomenon in which (children’s) bodies also play a decisive role (Castañeda, 2002; Prout, 2000).

Ontopolitics in intragenerational relations

From a Childhood Studies' background ontopolitics for and with children are deeply interwoven with generational order (Alanen, 2009) and difference. Among the vast literature and the broad discussion on generation in Childhood Studies (for an overview of the existing debate cf. Leonard, 2016) the emphasis on *intragenerational* relations which will be deployed here puts the focus on the relationality of childhood (Wyness, 2013). In their recent work Peach and Haynes (2023) also use the term 'intra-generational'. They borrow the prefix 'intra' from Barad's (2007) work in order to tackle ageism and a "linear, essentialist and developmental understanding of the human lifespan" (Peach and Haynes, 2023: 5), by opening new ways of post-age encounters between children and adults as members of different generations. While we clearly share these assumptions and the ontology connected to it, we use the term 'intra-generational' slightly different in two ways. First we use the term to make it clear, that generational difference is not only brought into being between children and adults but also *within* the same generation – in our case childhood (Punch, 2020). Secondly, by referring to onto-politics we want to show how the very notion of the child as an ontological category is enacted in situated practices by mobilizing several different human and non-human as well as discursive and material entities. Kraftl (2020) also emphasizes this aspect of the interference of different, also non- and more than human actors in the emergence of generation when he proposes the alternative concept of "infra-generation" (Kraftl, 2020: 107–136). In a similar vein as we use "intragenerational ontopolitics" Kraftl conceptualises infra-generational relations "in order to explicate the more-than-generational and more-than-human processes, energies, materialities, technologies, media, affects and more that constitute the temporalities in which childhoods are enveloped, and of which they are productive" (Kraftl, 2020: 112).

Skate parks as spatial sites for ontopolitics of childhood

The fact that this generational (re-)production is always also spatially situated will become apparent in our case study which situates itself in the long tradition of socio-spatial research on the repurposing of urban spaces by children and young people (Mey, 2016). Especially within Children's Geographies the (re-)inhabitation of public urban space plays a vital role (i.e., Andal, 2022; Bourke, 2017; Convertino, 2023; Porter et al., 2021). In view of limited public, socio-spatial resources (Mitchell et al., 2015), skate parks are spaces for specific practices of youth and children's culture (Bradley, 2010; Goldenberg and Shooter, 2009). The parks are not only meeting places. They also offer a space that is prefigured for specifically defined forms of practices. Practices such as riding skateboards, BMX bikes, or inline skates were originally characterized by the way in which they re-interpreted and appropriated spaces, materials, limitations, locations, and urban spaces using the respective practice of youth culture (Borden, 2019). However, skate parks represent a way of binding or 'zoning' these youth practices to one location in the city–practices which used to be spatially unrestricted (Dirks et al., 2016: 29). This means that skate parks are locations for forms of youth practices – locations that have been defined by municipal decision-makers. This zoning by means of skate parks represents a "design"

(Spyrou, 2022) for the practices of children and young people that enables a certain way of being for them but also prevents other ways of being and may insofar be regarded as ontopolitical in our understanding of the word (Law and Mol, 2008a) – by assigning certain spaces to these groups to exclude them from other public spaces that are intended primarily for adults (e.g., parking lots or parks).

More recently however, skate parks have not only been used by young people riding skateboards, BMX bikes, or inline skates. Instead, for the last several years there has been an increasing number of stunt scooter riders, which tend to be somewhat younger in age. They also use these enclosed locations of youth culture to carry out their own practice. Because of ‘public space’ being a scarce resource for children and young people and the attractiveness of skate parks, these have become the scene for political generational conflicts between children and young people – even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that the effects of zoning the practices of children and young people in public urban spaces can be analysed using the example of this specific place in regard to generational ordering processes both within and beyond a binary adult-child difference (Punch, 2020), and based on this, one can ask which processes of generational ordering can be observed. Both questions will be examined in the following using an exploratory case study.

Skate parks as a location for generational conflicts: An exploratory case study

The following analyses are based on initial results of a case study conducted as part of an ethnographic pre-study in the project ‘Occupying Public Urban Space with Stunt Scooters: Collective Learning Through Motion in Children’s Peer Cultures’.² In the pre-study, which lasted several months in summer 2021, the focus was on getting to know the skate park – located near the city centre in a medium-sized city in Germany – and its actors. The pre-study was followed by the main project phase, during which four participative case studies have been carried out from summer 2022 to early 2023. These case studies were based on the results and experiences from the pre-study and have been realised together with actors from the research site. They focused on the planning and construction process of a new scooter area (Jäde et al., 2024). A process that became necessary because of the tensions at the skatepark – especially between the groups of skaters and scooter riders. In the following, the history of this emerging conflict will be described in more detail.

Case description: From inclusion to exclusion to partial sufferance

In 2015, the skate park was built with the participation of skateboarders, BMX bikers, and inline skaters and has been heavily frequented ever since. As in other cities, scooter riders have joined them. In the words of a person in charge of the municipality and responsible for the park, this led “very clearly and finally to processes of use, displacement, and conquest in the public space”. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the skate park was often at its limits in terms of capacity. Covid accelerated and exacerbated the ongoing

dynamics such that the need for outdoor public spaces for children and young people drastically increased due to school closures and the lack of alternative spaces. This also meant that the conflicts between scooter riders and other user groups continued to grow. The Covid social distancing regulations could no longer be upheld due to overcrowding, and the company operating the park decided in consultation with the municipality's youth workers to implement regulatory measures in the spring of 2021: The scooter riders were completely prohibited from using the park.

The municipality's youth workers felt that there was no alternative to this decision, as the only other option would have been to close the park to everyone due to the pandemic – something that was done in other cities.³ There were two reasons given for prohibiting scooter riders from using the park: On the one hand there was the quantitative argument that the user group was simply getting too big. On the other hand, the qualitative argument referred to the incompatibility of riding styles or lines that led to an increased risk of accidents between scooter riders and other users. The second argument also stated that the construction of the park was not originally conceptualised for stunt scooters, and it was therefore logical to prohibit this group from using the park and not the already established user groups.

The pandemic therefore served as a double catalyst for the local problem, as children and young people depended even more on the already scarce public space, but at the same time, the growing number of children and young people in a limited space was viewed as problematic in terms of preventing infections. The exclusion of scooter riders was thus the result of many different events and actors with in part diverging interests – the users' annoyance at the presence of scooter riders would not have been sufficient – and then became an official policy moment. After this official policy measure was implemented, it attained a rationality that continued to apply even when the outdoor social distancing regulations of the pandemic had already been rescinded.

Several initiatives were created as a reaction to the exclusion of scooter riders: Supported by their parents, a group of scooter riders turned to the local youth parliament. At the same time, the skater scene organized itself and expressed its interests in a way that drew public attention, for example by giving interviews to the local press and compiling a list with over 100 signatures in which skaters spoke out against the joint use of the park with the scooter riders. Accidents between scooter riders and skaters at the skate park, a few of which were very serious, further politicized the conflict. The city as park operator saw itself as responsible for ensuring public safety and reacted by attempting to reach a compromise according to which the scooter riders are permitted to use the park on two specific afternoons. However, this compromise did not resolve the conflict. The dynamic continued to be reinforced, and the construction of a new area for scooters to separate the scenes was viewed to be the only possible solution.

Against this background the ethnographic pre-study has been carried out. One of the authors followed the occurrences on the skate park for several months as part of a focused ethnographic observation. Once a week, she visited the skate park for several hours and, as her presence gradually became normalized, she eventually became part of the park's 'inventory' (Breidenstein et al., 2013). The normalization of the researcher's presence was necessary because, for example, she herself did not practice any sports on site, did not

look after any children who used the park or met up with friends there. During the observations field notes were made, and logs were written afterwards (Emerson et al., 2011). The collected material was then evaluated using grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1996). Following Clarke et al. (2022), we also draw on the previously stated underlying principles of ontopolitics and consider situations to be fundamentally fluid and the result of a wide variety of interactions and interdependencies between all actors involved. During the research processes different materials⁴ were collected in addition to the field notes. Also interviews have been conducted with people who held political responsibility in the municipality. Some of these interviews were carried out on the skate park. Moreover observations of a public meeting of the youth parliament were included.

In accordance with the requirements of the funding body, an ethics application was submitted to the Ethics Board of the Osnabrück University, where the research team carried out the project, which has been approved. In the conducted analyses, different key concepts and categories could be identified, two of which are focused on below. These are presented and discussed on the basis of two extracts from the field notes.

Generational order as part of a policy of zoning

Using two selected scenes, we will first show how various references to the categories of age and generation could be understood as an element of a policy of zoning. Zoning as a part of a social work practice explicitly refers to a location that can be physically identified, as Dirks et al. (2016) highlighted – in the current case a skate park. However, the zoning also points to the connection and act of relating various politics as a way of dealing with childhood, youth, and a practice identified as belonging to these actors. Using the existing data, we can show how zoning described by Dirks et al. (2016) works for the skate park. This zoning was a relational and certainly also a political process that was initiated and desired by the policy-makers and social workers at the municipal level, but at the same time was carried out as an inherent practice of the children and young people in the field. A policy of zoning is thus part of the practice of scooter riders and other skate park users.

To emphasize the role that generational orders and generational ordering played in this zoning processes, in the following analysis we will focus on two categories: (a) the scooters as a symbolic obstacle for established practice and (b) age as a relational (and relative) category.

The first category, within which (a) *the scooter becomes a symbolic obstacle for established practice*, is illustrated by the following scene from one of the logs. The observed situation took place at the skate park where, besides the observer, several scooter and BMX riders had gathered.

When Lars⁵ [with his BMX bike] heads to the right from the quarter pipe toward the platform, he suddenly yells out: “Get your fricking scooters off the track! You should be happy you’re even allowed to be here!” Lars directed his outburst at Luca and Tim, who alternate between looking at Lars and then at each other. They’re sitting on a rock in the shade to the right of me,

resting. Cursing, Lars completes a turn and rides away toward the north side of the track. The handlebar of Tim's scooter is sticking out onto the track by about 30 cm. Somewhat confused but also cautious, Tim gets up and walks over to the track, where he grabs his scooter on the side of the handlebar that's sticking up in the air. He brings the scooter back to the rock, where he sits down next to Luca again. [...] Ironically, a short time later I observe that when Miro [another BMX rider] and Lars are sitting on the paved edge of the track to the left of me smoking a joint, both of their BMX bikes are sticking out onto the track.

In this excerpt, one can see that and how the tone at the skate park is becoming increasingly harsh. With his statement "you should be happy", Lars the BMX rider demands not only humbleness and gratefulness from the two young scooter riders. He also makes it very clear that the scooter does not fit with *his* park – it does not belong in *his* space. His comment about the "track" shows that he wants to use this location for his sport, and that the scooter merely represents an obstacle for his practice. Other sports equipment like skateboards, inline skates, or BMX bikes that are also just lying around and could potentially be a hazard are not viewed as an obstacle for his own practice and their owners do not need to justify themselves.

In this situation, one can find various levels of a differentiation process that runs along the enabling of access to the skate park as a space. The BMX rider, who belongs to the legitimate user group, announces that the scooter riders should be happy they are even allowed to be there. This points to a complex political dimension that is not only negotiated at the skate park itself but becomes important in numerous generational ways. Practices are differentiated that are also closely intertwined with 'doing age.' From the research data, various situations can be found in which scooter riders are marked as being very young or much younger, an attribution that goes along with assuming they are not skilled enough which in turn leads to them being denied access. At times, the scooter riders are equated with small children riding bobby cars to dramatize the large difference in leisure time practices as well as age. The links between infantilization and different leisure time practices thus once again refers to the politically effective issue of danger. At this point, it can be argued that the scooter in the excerpt above is a symbol for an object that does not fit and endangers other participants, as it stands for a childish practice that is bothersome at the skate park. By mentioning the annoying scooter, a generational order is created that includes or excludes with the help of age as a category. Here a differentiation is made that attributes specific skills based on different equipment and the practical expectations linked to them. These skill attributions are made according to the adult body (in this case viewed as capable) versus the childlike body (in this case viewed as not being sufficiently capable, at least not for the skate park at this time). Generational ordering can thus be understood as an intergenerational phenomenon.

The second category identified from the material becomes visible is (b) *age as a relational (and relative) category*. This makes it clear that generational ordering is not only an ordering practice of zoning as exercised by adults, but also an inherent element in the field that is also part of a scooter practice.

As in the previous week, today I once again observe Ilja [a scooter rider] attempting to be the ‘park guard’. Repeatedly, he talks to users at the park who look young and asks them how old they are. “Are you eight years old already?” “Hey, you, how old are you?” If one of the children answers that they are younger than eight, Ilja tells them that they are not allowed to use the park until they are eight years old. “Just come back next year when you’re eight”. He is therefore making sure that the younger children leave the park, although he does not speak as frequently to children who are there with their parents. Ilja often speaks very calmly with the children, leaning on his handlebar so that he’s more at the children’s eye level instead of standing upright in front of them, for example. With the remark that Arne [the youth worker who is mainly responsible for the skate park] had allowed them as users to tell children who were not yet eight years old to leave the park, Ilja (un)consciously acts as an ordering authority at the skate park. In a certain regard, he thereby takes on an institutional function by attempting to uphold the rules set by the municipality. However, I also know that Ilja himself is sometimes annoyed by younger scooter riders at the park. He is therefore not only looking out for the safety of the younger children, he is also trying to keep the park as clear as possible for the intended user group – to which the scooter riders themselves do not actually belong.

In this scene Ilja becomes the ‘park guard’ by taking on set zoning practices and making them part of his practice at the skate park even though he, as a scooter rider, is himself someone who is only partially allowed in this space. By emphasizing age in connection with the assumed (scooter riding) skills, he specifically contributes to producing generational order. Naming affiliations using the category of age or generation becomes the path to legitimating access or exclusion and thus contours the zoning practice. Ilja himself takes on an important position for the zoning and plays an intra-generational ordering role. That is also relevant because the question of age has a different weight in practice. Children who are younger than eight but who ride a skateboard are not excluded per se.

The correct sports practice for the space seems to be important when, for example, the youth worker Arne says in another scene in which a very young skateboarder goes past him: “I’m not the public order office who kicks people out of the park even if they’re riding properly”. Age as a line of difference therefore intertwines with the difference in the respective sports practices and is only used in part to lead to exclusion. This means that generational ordering becomes part of sports practices and is displayed very specifically in relation to movement and riding skills.

Analysis: Generational politics within and beyond binary generational orders

Generational politics and politics of generational ordering

What becomes clear from the selected examples and the analyses is, that the situation can be understood first as an established-outsiders constellation as described prominently by [Elias and Scotson \(1965/2002\)](#). The established group consisting of skateboarders, BMX riders, and inline skaters feels annoyed by the newly arrived scooter riders. The

established then reclaim the public but zoned and thus functionalized space exclusively for their own practices. By doing so, they are able to stigmatize and regulate the outsider group. Our case study makes clear how ‘generation’ and politics of generationing play a key role in this process.

First, the constellation is already prestructured along generational lines in two ways: (i) The outsider group belongs to a later generation than the group of the established both as described by Mannheim (1952) and Hengst (2013). Mannheim and Hengst assume that society has sequential generations (Mannheim, 1952) in which one generation follows the next, which then leads to “contemporaries” among the members of one generation (Hengst, 2013). The stunt scooter practice is younger than the skateboard, BMX, and inline skate practices, all of which were already established when the park was built and could therefore inscribe themselves architecturally into the park. (ii) It is not only scooter riding that is the younger practice. The tendency is that the scooter riders themselves are younger than those who engage in the other sports practices. This also shows evidence of a binary generational order as described by Alanen (2009) that places young and adult skateboard riders, BMX riders, and inline skaters on one side of a line and scooter riders on the other, marking them socially as children.

Secondly, this also shows that this generational differentiation of the participants has to be practically emphasized – not only at the skate park, but also in the media, in the youth parliament, in municipal ordinances, etc. For example, already existing rules, according to which the park is only open for children who are at least 8 years old, are mobilized and interpreted to the benefit of the established group to keep younger scooter riders out of the park while their own ‘up and coming talent’ is excepted from this exclusion. Generation therefore becomes a topic in the form of politics of generational ordering: Whether a specific seven-year-old is considered a child at the skate park depends in part on whether they ride a skateboard or a scooter. This means that the ontological status of ‘child’ is not defined according to characteristics that are inherent to the person and substantially given (such as age or stage of development), but is the result of ontopolitics as described by Mol (2013): dynamic processes lead to the attribution of ‘child’ as characteristics interact with material, spatial, and physical practices, rules, and discourses.

As a result of the ontopolitics, while producing generational orders also generational ordering is done (Alanen, 2009) that fulfills the purpose of regulating access and exclusion while legitimating one group’s sovereignty over the space. The practice of skateboarding, which is connotated as a youth and thus older practice, enables the adherents of this group to come together and join up as an established group that claims group privileges in using the skate park. However, scooter riders are not completely powerless. They also make use of the political means available to them: A privilege of (some of) the scooter riders is the ability to mobilize their parents and their ‘generational’ social capital. Young people cannot access this resource because they are considered more independent political actors. It is therefore not a coincidence that scooter riders allow themselves to be represented by their parents in public political negotiations while the skateboarders organise themselves, although they also have the support of other institutions. In the end, this enables the scooter riders to achieve at least a short-term and partial sufferance of their use of the skate park and, in the medium term, get their ‘own’

scooter park – even if this naturally means that this practice is further zoned (separate from the zone of the skaters) as described by Dirks et al. (2016).

Generational ordering within and beyond binary generational orders

When attempting to analyse generational processes of ordering, we can therefore distinguish the relational production of a continuum between young people and adults on the side of the established, on the one hand, and children as outsiders on the other hand. The child is on the one side, the adult on the other. Even ‘adulthood’ (Johansson, 2012) is produced in the field, although this is not necessarily found in the form of an older adult or person in a parental role. Instead, young skaters or other participants in the field can also mark this point on the continuum. Or to put it in other terms: They can be ‘read’ as more competent or older persons that independently try to create order at the park as guards, for example.

Leonard (2016) deploys the concept of generativity to shed light on the enactment of children’s agency within the generational order. Thereby she differentiates between the two components intergenerativity and intragenerativity. While the first refers to relations *between* adults and children, the notion of intragenerativity reveals how agency develops *within* a certain generation and which power relations come into play (Leonard, 2020: 413). Leonard’s point is that being far from a homogeneous group, children’s relations are coined by the way other categories such as gender, religion, class, and so on are made relevant. In fact we have been able to demonstrate elsewhere (von der Heyde et al., 2024) how gender and masculinities are enacted on the skate park and how this affects the relations between the two different groups of the skaters and stunt scooter riders. Here, however, we want to argue that also within a certain generation, that means among children and young people themselves, generational difference and order are brought into being and have an effect on children’s agency. Or, to put it in Leonard’s terms, ‘generation’ may become a relevant category for intragenerativity.

In a way, this can be understood as going beyond binary generations in an intra-generational sense. Punch (2020) criticises this aspect by pointing to the great importance of ‘birth order’ among siblings.

Thus the generational order is not only about a binary between childhood and adulthood but should also include intra-generational relations. When considering concepts like agency and power, the greatest focus tends to be centred on vertical adult-child relations rather than lateral relations between children. (Punch, 2020: 39; see also Punch and Vanderbeck, 2018)

Based on this argument, the result of this practice can be understood both as a binary *generationing* that can explain the process of producing a generational order, as well as a differentiation beyond such an order, that is, a field-specific differentiation that only becomes a ‘generation’ in practice on site. Law and Mol (2008a) view precisely these intragenerational differentiations as political practices when it comes to legitimizing access to and exclusion from the skate park (on the various levels between more publicity in the form of local media, municipal politics, administration, and the public as well as

practices at the skate park). The skate park and the negotiations that occur on and around it open up a political arena that refers back to generational ordering processes and, at the same time, generate these.

Conclusion: Generational ontopolitics beyond the binary generational difference

It could be shown empirically how scarce urban space is functionalized for children and young people by zoning as a municipal political measure. In [Leonard's \(2016\)](#) terms of generagency this can be regarded as an ambiguous example of intergeneragency: The park was created together with skaters and other established user groups in order to locate their activities to a defined space. The resulting site was highly attractive for them, but also for the newly arrived scooter riders, for whom the skate park is also the preferred space for exercising their practice. This results to relations among the different user groups which may be defined in terms of intrageneragency. The conflicts that arise between the user groups are political to the extent that the debates are not just about negotiating for scarce resources in the form of daily access options for the skate park and possibilities for using it. Instead, they are also about including the possible forms of access in a network of regulations and interpretations that were formed in political, professional, or media-public contexts as a response to the occurrences at the skate park: *Technically*, only users who are at least 8 years old are allowed to use the park; *originally*, the park was only constructed with only skateboards, BMX bikes, and inline skates in mind and not for stunt scooters; *normally*, scooter riders are only permitted to use the park on two afternoons a week. However, these rules and their interpretations were not absolutely applied but were activated and used situationally and in a differentiated manner by the actors involved in the on-site processes of negotiation – for example, the general age limitation was applied to scooter riders but not to skateboarders. At the same time, scooter riders also used the park outside of the times assigned to them. When observing scooter practices, it became clear that at the park, the children and young people themselves took on and helped shape the set rules and zoning orders that included enclosing practices of child and youth culture, and in doing so, became political actors.

When looking at the objectives of this article stated at the outset, we were able to show that zoning can be reconstructed analytically even beyond an adult-child difference and how this can be done (1). It was precisely through this generational ordering as a part of the practice of zoning that we could see that it also represented very political processes (2). For Childhood Studies and the concept of 'generation' that is central for this field, the analyses show (3) that the generational politics there and beyond are not limited to the unarguably important binary of adults here and children or young people there. Instead, intragenerational negotiations and conflicts become visible that take place in a generationally layered society ([Mannheim, 1952](#)). Carrying on in the line of [Punch \(2020\)](#), we therefore argue for splitting up the concept of generation intragenerationally between childhood and young people and understanding each of these as their own continuum. Following [Mol \(2013\)](#), we view 'child' as a powerful but contingent form of being that is political insofar as it co-determines the ontology of children.

We share the discomfort with common linear, age chronological and developmental notions of generation that has been on the outset of Childhood Studies (Burman, 1994). We also link in with more contemporary attempts not to deconstruct notions of age, development and biological childhood per se but to analyse *how* those seemingly stable entities are brought into being (Ryan, 2011) or ‘enacted’ (Law and Mol, 2008b). Chronological age is a strong but not the only driver if one in a certain situation becomes a child or not and, if so, how much: Age rather relates to differing contexts, materialities (skateboard or stunt scooter), (driving) skills and so forth (Kraftl, 2020: 112). We payed particular notice to the spatial dimension of those generational ontopolitics: The ‘polis’ is not just a point of reference for bringing individuals as children into being (Häkli and Kallio, 2014) but also is constituted within infra-generational relations (Kraftl, 2020) through which individuals manoeuvre as children, young people or adults and achieve a certain sense of agency.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme (101004491).

ORCID iDs

Florian Eßer  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7470-4252>

Sylvia Jäde  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1742-4872>

Notes

1. Oswell (2016) critically mentions that such ambitions already existed in Childhood Studies long before the so called ‘New Wave’ had been announced.
2. This was part of the SMOOTH (‘Educational Common Spaces. Passing Through Enclosures and Reversing Inequalities’) project which is funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No. 101004491).
3. A particularly drastic example was the measure taken by a mayor in the German town of Dieburg that drew a great deal of media attention. He had the skate park covered in gravel so that it could not be used by children and young people.
4. Mainly publicly accessible documents such as newspaper articles and online notifications from the responsible authorities’ Web site.
5. All personal information was pseudonymized.

References

- Alanen L (2009) Generational order. In: Qvortrup J, Corsaro WA and Honig M-S (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 159–174.
- Alanen L, Brooker E and Mayall B (2015) *Childhood with Bourdieu*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Andal AG (2022) Children's spaces in coastal cities: challenges to conventional urban understandings and prospects for child-friendly blue urbanism. *Children's Geographies* 20(5): 688–700. DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2021.1962515](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2021.1962515).
- Balogopalan S (2014) *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Barad K (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Borden I (2019) *Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Bourke J (2017) Children's experiences of their everyday walks through a complex urban landscape of belonging. *Children's Geographies* 15(1): 93–106. DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2016.1192582](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1192582).
- Bradley GL (2010) Skate parks as a context for adolescent development. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 25(2): 288–323. DOI: [10.1177/0743558409357236](https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558409357236).
- Braidotti R (2013) *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Breidenstein G, Hirschauer S, Kalthoff H, et al. (2013) *Ethnografie. Die Praxis der Feldforschung*. Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Burman E (1994) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Cardell D and Lindgren A-L (2024) The sex-map as didactic object: ontonorms in Swedish sex education. *Childhood* 31: 212–229. DOI: [10.1177/09075682241230441](https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682241230441).
- Castañeda C (2002) Figurations. In: *Child, Bodies, Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Clarke AE, Washburn R and Frieze C (2022) Introducing situational analysis. In: Clarke AE, Washburn R and Frieze C (eds) *Situational Analysis in Practice*. 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, 5–36.
- Convertino C (2023) The right to the school: urban schooling, place-based education, and youth agency at the intersection of gentrification. *Children's Geographies* 21(4): 770–784. DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2022.2137389](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2022.2137389).
- Dirks S, Fritsche C, Lippelt M, et al. (2016) Zur pädagogischen Herstellung städtischer Räume zwischen Ort und Klient. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 62(1): 20–33. DOI: [10.25656/01:16703](https://doi.org/10.25656/01:16703).
- Elias N and Scotson JL (1965–2002) *Etablierte und Außenseiter*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Emerson RM, Fretz RI and Shaw LL (2011) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eßer F (2016) Neither “thick” nor “thin”. Reconceptualising agency and childhood relationally. In: Eßer F, Baader MS, Betz T, et al. (eds) *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood. New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*. London: Routledge, 48–60.
- Eßer F (2017) Enacting the overweight body in residential child care: eating and agency beyond the nature–culture divide. *Childhood* 24(3): 286–299. DOI: [10.1177/0907568216688245](https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568216688245).
- Goldenberg M and Shooter W (2009) Skateboard park participation: a means-end analysis. *Journal of Youth Development* 4(4): 36–47. DOI: [10.5195/jyd.2009.240](https://doi.org/10.5195/jyd.2009.240).

- Häkli J and Kallio KP (2014) Subject, action and polis: theorizing political agency. *Progress in Human Geography* 38(2): 181–200. DOI: [10.1177/0309132512473869](https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512473869).
- Haraway DJ (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hengst H (2013) *Kindheit im 21. Jahrhundert. Differenzielle Zeitgenossenschaft*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
- Holloway SL, Holt L and Mills S (2019) Questions of agency: capacity, subjectivity, spatiality and temporality. *Progress in Human Geography* 43(3): 458–477. DOI: [10.1177/0309132518757654](https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132518757654).
- Jacobs JM (2006) A geography of big things. *Cultural Geographies* 13(1): 1–27. DOI: [10.1191/1474474006eu354oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1474474006eu354oa).
- Jäde S, Eßer F and von der Heyde J (2024) Stunt scooter and educational commons: a German case study. In: Cappello G, Siino M, Fernandes N, et al. (eds) *Educational Commons: Democratic Values, Social Justice and Inclusion in Education*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 87–107.
- Johansson B (2012) Doing adulthood in childhood research. *Childhood* 19(1): 101–114. DOI: [10.1177/0907568211408362](https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568211408362).
- Kraftl P (2020) *After Childhood: Re-thinking Environment, Materiality and Media in Children's Lives*. London: Routledge.
- Kraftl P and Horton J (2018) Children's geographies and the 'new wave' of childhood studies. In: Spyrou S, Rosen R and Cook DT (eds) *Reimagining Childhood Studies*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 105–122.
- Kraftl P, Hadfield-Hill S, Jarman P, et al. (2022) Articulating encounters between children and plastics. *Childhood* 29(4): 478–494. DOI: [10.1177/09075682221100879](https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682221100879).
- Latour B (1999) *Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Law J and Mol A (2008a) Globalisation in practice: on the politics of boiling pigswill. *Geoforum* 39(1): 133–143. DOI: [10.1016/j.geoforum.2006.08.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2006.08.010).
- Law J and Mol A (2008b) The actor-enacted: cumbrian sheep in 2001. In: Knappett C and Malafouris L (eds) *Material Agency: Towards a Non-anthropocentric Approach*. New York: Springer US, 57–77.
- Lee N and Motzkau J (2011) Navigating the bio-politics of childhood. *Childhood* 18(1): 7–19. DOI: [10.1177/0907568210371526](https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568210371526).
- Leonard M (2016) *The Sociology of Children, Childhood and Generation*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Leonard M (2020) Precarity, rights and resistance in the everyday lives of children and young people. *Journal of Sociology* 56(3): 405–421. DOI: [10.1177/1440783319846187](https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319846187).
- Liebel M (2020) *Decolonizing Childhoods: From Exclusion to Dignity*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Mannheim K (1952) The problem of generations. In: Kecskemeti P (ed) *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge: Collected Works*. New York: Routledge, Vol. 5, 276–322.
- Mead GH (1934) Mind, self, and society. In: *From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago: University Press.
- Mey G (2016) Martha Muchow's research on children's life space: a classic study on childhood in the light of the present. In: Eßer F, Baader MS, Betz T, et al. (eds) *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood. New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*. London: Routledge, 150–164.

- Mitchell D, Attoh K and Staeheli L (2015) Whose city? What politics? Contentious and non-contentious spaces on Colorado's Front Range. *Urban Studies* 52(14): 2633–2648. DOI: [10.1177/0042098014550460](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014550460).
- Mol A (1999) Ontological politics. A word and some questions. In: Law J and Hassard J (eds) *Actor Network Theory and after*. Oxford: Blackwell, 74–89.
- Mol A (2013) Mind your plate! The ontonorms of Dutch dieting. *Social Studies of Science* 43(3): 379–396. DOI: [10.1177/0306312712456948](https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312712456948).
- Oswell D (2016) Re-aligning children's agency and re-socialising children in Childhood Studies. In: Eßer F, Baader MS, Betz T, et al. (eds) *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood. New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*. London: Routledge, 19–33.
- Peach L and Haynes J (2023) Intra-generational encounters with balloons and bread rolls: exploring reciprocity in post/age spaces. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 1–20. DOI: [10.1080/14681366.2023.2215792](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2023.2215792).
- Porter L, Spark C and De Kleyn L (2021) Navigating the neighbourhood: gender, place and agency in children's mobility. *Children's Geographies* 19(3): 339–350. DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2020.1787950](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2020.1787950).
- Prout A (2000) Childhood bodies. Construction, agency and hybridity. In: Prout A (ed) *The Body, Childhood and Society*. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1–18.
- Punch S (2020) Why have generational orderings been marginalised in the social sciences including childhood studies? *Children's Geographies* 18(2): 128–140. DOI: [10.1080/14733285.2019.1630716](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1630716).
- Punch S and Vanderbeck R (2018) Introduction: families, intergenerationality and peer group relations. In: Punch S and Vanderbeck R (eds) *Families, Intergenerationality, and Peer Group Relations*. Singapore: Springer, 3–26.
- Ryan KW (2011) The new wave of childhood studies: breaking the grip of bio-social dualism? *Childhood* 19(4): 439–452. DOI: [10.1177/0907568211427612](https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568211427612).
- Spyrou S (2017) Time to decenter childhood? *Childhood* 24(4): 433–437. DOI: [10.1177/0907568217725936](https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568217725936).
- Spyrou S (2018) Disclosing childhoods. In: *Research and Knowledge Production for a Critical Childhood Studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Spyrou S (2022) When design designs children: the importance of ontological design for Childhood Studies. *Childhood* 29(4): 471–477. DOI: [10.1177/09075682221125859](https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682221125859).
- Strauss A and Corbin J (1996) Grounded theory. In: *Grundlagen Qualitativer Sozialforschung*. Weinheim: Beltz.
- Taylor A and Pacini-Ketchabaw V (2020) Learning with children, ants, and worms in the Anthropocene: towards a common world pedagogy of multispecies vulnerability. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 23(4): 507–529. DOI: [10.1080/14681366.2015.1039050](https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2015.1039050).
- von der Heyde J, Eßer F and Jäde S (2024) Materialisations of masculinity in childhood: theoretical perspectives on being a boy in childhood. In: Mukherjee U (ed) *Debating Childhood Masculinities*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited, 49–69. DOI: [10.1108/978-1-80455-390-920241005](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80455-390-920241005).
- Woolgar S and Lezaun J (2013) The Wrong Bin Bag. A turn to ontology in science and technology studies? *Social Studies of Science* 43(3): 321–340. DOI: [10.1177/0306312713488820](https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312713488820).
- Wyness MG (2013) Children's Participation and Intergenerational Dialogue. Bringing adults back into the analysis. *Childhood* 20(4): 429–442. DOI: [10.1177/0907568212459775](https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568212459775).