



Christina R. Ergler

THE POWER OF PLACE IN PLAY

A Bourdieusian Analysis of
Auckland Children's Seasonal
Play Practices

[transcript] Social and Cultural Geography

From:

Christina R. Ergler

The Power of Place in Play

A Bourdieusian Analysis of Auckland Children's Seasonal Play Practices

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»There's nothing really fun about the park in winter!« – Christina Ergler is the first one to explore why ›play‹ resonates differently across urban localities and seasons. She draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice and Gibson's affordance theory to show that determinants of seasonal outdoor play transcend modifiable barriers such as traffic and unsuitable play spaces as well as the inevitable issue of inclement weather. In contrast, seasonal play determinants are grounded in locally constituted beliefs about what is seasonally ›appropriate‹ children's activity. To foster a healthier and more sustainable life for children, outdoor play needs to become convenient all-year-round in all locations.

Christina R. Ergler is a lecturer in Social Geography at The University of Otago, New Zealand. Her research interests are at the intersection of geography, sociology and public health and centre on interdisciplinary approaches to health and wellbeing, socio-spatial health inequalities, experiential dimension of health and wellbeing, and participatory research methods.

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Abstract

The physical activity associated with independent outdoor play has gained attention as a way to improve children's health. Despite it fostering healthy physical, mental and social development, in many high-income countries children's autonomous play opportunities have diminished due to urban intensification and declining parental license. Regardless of these general trends, children's play varies across countries, cities, cultures and seasons. In the context of New Zealand—which projects a 'green and clean' image with citizens regarding themselves as outdoor people—this book explores why 'play' might resonate differently across localities and seasons. The aim is to move beyond the dominant aspatial and aseasonal understanding of play. In particular, I explore in this book the structure-agency interplay of seasonal outdoor play by examining families' perspectives and practices of seasonal outdoor play alongside those of environmental and societal structures. I contrast the seasonal play affordances provided by the apartment dominated landscape of Central Auckland with those of the suburban Beach Haven.

The conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning' this research is a development of Bourdieu's triad of field, capital and habitus coupled with Gibson's affordance theory. I draw on data derived from 73 semi-structured interviews with parents and children (8–10 years) and 38 child GPS tracks (obtained over 8 days in summer and winter). Data collection included further elicited drawings, travel diaries and parental surveys. During a follow-up study child-participants became *de facto* researchers, analysed their data collaboratively and took non-local children on a child-led neighbourhood walk.

I advance two arguments in this book. First, I highlight the importance of a placed analysis of the structures and practices that shape children's seasonal outdoor play. I suggest that the rarity of children playing outdoors unsupervised normalises supervised indoor play and reduces children's opportunities to see outdoor play as an alternative to interior or supervised pastimes. Second, I follow Bourdieu's theory of practice to argue that the empathy parents and children have towards outdoor play reflects locally constituted beliefs about what is seasonally 'appropriate' children's

activity. These beliefs are related to the type of habitus families embody (e.g. ‘outdoor habitus’, ‘curtailed outdoor habitus’ and ‘hibernating outdoor habitus’), which is formed through historical, placed and seasonal specific structures and practices. I find that the determinants of seasonal outdoor play transcend modifiable barriers such as traffic and unsuitable play spaces as well as the inevitable issue of inclement weather. I conclude in the book that a focus on place and season, which is embedded in the historical structure-agency interplay of children’s outdoor play, is well positioned to illustrate the recursive relationships between locality, seasonality and (historical) practices. In other words, play is spatially and seasonally diverse.

KEYWORDS

Affordances, Auckland, Bourdieu, central city, children, children’s geographies, embodiment, environmental literacy, Gibson, health, independent mobility, intensification, participatory ethnography, physical activity, play, seasonality, suburban, summer, urban, weather, wellbeing, winter

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Prologue

My thesis has taken me on a journey from Germany to New Zealand by changing my host University. It has also taken me on a journey from a master project researching stakeholders' and slum inhabitants' perspectives on the quality of the Indian health care system to this study exploring family perspectives on outdoor play. The thesis itself has been a journey, from first engaging with a new topic to finding my own position as a children's geographies researcher. It has allowed me to reflect on my own outdoor play experiences as a child growing up in a detached house with a huge yard close to a forest, and the differences for children growing up today in high-rise apartment complexes in Auckland's central city as well as those in the sprawling suburbs. Although I was 'bubble-wrapped' by affluence and did not experience poverty or gang culture as some of my young collaborators/participants in the suburb have, I was not over-protected in terms of independent play experiences as many children are today. My parents set rules around crossing and playing on a busy street close to our house, but there were hardly any restrictions on my outdoor play or where I was allowed to go.

When I was five I got my first bike; a tiny red bicycle which took me on various excursions around our neighbourhood. It quickly carried me from place to place giving me a sense of freedom and confidence. I soon found out how fast I could go on the bike and how far I could travel without having trouble finding my way back. I created my own mental map of my neighbourhood. I recall exploring short cuts and detours; finding lovely gardens with lots of flowers and joyful moments looking at the abundance of colours when I was out exploring my neighbourhood. I had routes I would take to get quickly from my home to my friend's place; routes I would take to test how fast I could go on my bike; and routes I would take to check how certain flowers or fruits were growing. I recall one of our neighbours had a huge raspberry bush and some afternoons all the neighbourhood kids gathered around the bush and enjoyed raspberries to the annoyance of the owner.

All my friends lived within a five minute bike ride from my home, and most of them within a two minute walk. After school I would come home and do my

homework and then I would play. We played in the summer heat and winter rain. We played in gardens, in cornfields, on trees, playgrounds, at friend's houses and attended organised sports, music classes or walked our dogs. We played with insects, tennis racquets and dolls. We got dirty, wet and cold. We were disappointed to stop playing when it was bedtime or got dark. However, my childhood was very different to my parents' childhood as is the childhood of my collaborators/participants different to their parents' one and to my childhood. I always envied my parents' freedom and adventures. I loved to hear their childhood stories; their adventures of exploring. My favourite story, for example, is that my father decided at the age of four to skip kindergarten and explore his city by bus.

Anecdotal accounts of changing play practices and independent mobility have always been a passion of mine, but I only began to engage with this topic academically when I moved to New Zealand and was offered a PhD scholarship associated with the Health Research Council-funded URBAN study. This project was concerned with relationships between the (built) environment and activity levels in neighbourhoods as a response to the increase in obesity and overweight in the New Zealand population. The research team offered me a new scholarly home and exposed me to new literature. The scope of the URBAN study became the space in which I developed my own research interests: children's physical activity and play in urban environments. Hence, the discourse of 'obesogenic environments' framed my approach to children's play practices. However, I cannot deny my own scholarly background. Soon it became clear that I was reading and assessing the literature with a holistic geographical lens and moving beyond the 'obesogenic environments' discourse in my thinking. Simply put, physical activity and 'environments' were too limiting for my geographical lens. I began to focus on 'obesogenic *landscapes*' rather than 'obesogenic environments'. In other words, I drew on the diverse and implied notions of 'landscape' in a geographical sense. In this regard, environments are not dissected into factors; they are constituted as landscapes encompassing the ever changing interplay between physical features and human beings. In brief, this thesis began to examine parental and children's experiences of outdoor play and activities and how these may be constrained by societal structures, physical neighbourhood settings and seasonal effects in the context of 'obesogenic landscapes' instead of 'obesogenic environments'. These directions developed overtime into a broader project focusing on the nature of and influences on children's play in the widest sense.

I have begun by disclosing my own childhood outdoor play experiences and my journey as a new researcher investigating urban children's physical activity in this Prologue in an attempt to situate myself as a (geographical) researcher for the reader. As the researcher I am an outsider in three ways: an adult researcher of children's experiences; someone who is not a parent at the time of writing this thesis; and someone who has grown up in a village in Germany and not in a house or apartment in New Zealand. I have, however, been willing to listen, to watch and to converse.

As a result, this thesis is a story about working *with* children, as opposed to working *on* children. Together, we shared my collaborators/participants' experiences of seasonal play in Auckland.

1. 'Playing around' with children's outdoor play

“Play...is based on representing emotional expressions but only within the systems of regulation such as rules, rituals or referees, although these restrictions break down [from time to time] under the force of the original emotion.”

(Sutton-Smith, 2011)

The World Health Organisation declared in the year 2000 that obesity was a global epidemic (WHO, 2000). As a result, there is a growing body of research exploring how 'obesogenic environments' contribute to the increasing prevalence of obesity. Children's play environments are one important component of the collective research focus that seeks to unpack children's 'obesogenic environments'. However, the human voice and societal norms and rules have, to a considerable extent, been underplayed in these studies. An improved understanding of the (built) environmental features that determine the character and frequency of outdoor play has been limited as a result. While recognising the scientific contribution of such work, I argue for an approach that takes the structure-agency interplay of children's seasonal geographies *fully* into account to reveal 'obesogenic *landscapes*' instead of 'obesogenic environments'. I choose this alternative term to indicate that the environments in which (non)activity takes place are dynamic and replete with meaning.¹

In this thesis, I employ what I term 'near and distant participatory ethnography' which consists of a mixed-method research design deriving from qualitative and

1 Landscapes in a geographical sense are the arenas for diverse symbolic meanings, norms and rules; they have pluralistic and multiple natures such as Tuan's (1979) landscapes of fear or Gesler's (1992) therapeutic landscapes. The formation of landscapes is more than the formation of an environment. Landscapes are shaped by countless physical, societal and individual influences and interactions. The geographical meaning of landscapes emphasises the subjectivity and individuality as well as commonalities within population groups of experiencing, viewing and valuing environments (Cresswell, 2014).

quantitative methods. With this methodological approach and through a conceptual framework that combines Bourdieu's (2000) triad of field, habitus and capital with Gibson's (1979) affordance theory I deconstruct 20 families' play practices in Auckland's central city (dominated by apartment living) and Beach Haven, a suburban housing area. The goal is to shed light on the 'more sustainable' living ideologies postulated by new urbanist city designs from the point of view of families. In particular, I contend that the detection, actualisation and experiencing of independent outdoor play opportunities in these intensifying environments are shaped by environmental and societal determinants across locational, seasonal and socio-historic aspects and families' play dispositions. In making this argument, I offer new insights into a nuanced and placed view on both the complex social and environmental influences shaping seasonal outdoor play as well as the participants' 'environmental literacy' respectively in a (highly walkable) urban environment. Hence, I contend that a placed social theory approach is overdue to inform understandings of 'obesogenic landscapes'.

I begin this introductory chapter by embedding the thesis within the URBAN study², the wider project within which it sits. I then outline the overall aim and objectives of the thesis and provide a brief foreshadowing of the methods applied. I 'place' (i.e. contextualise) the 'obesogenic landscapes' considered in this study before mapping the methodological journeys taken in the discipline of children's geographies. The terms 'play', 'environmental literacy' and 'neighbourhood' are defined and I conclude by presenting a chapter by chapter outline of the thesis.

EMBEDDINGS: THE URBAN STUDY

This research comprised one part of a larger research project that has investigated the association between body size and physical activity engagement in adults and children with built environmental variables in their neighbourhood in four New Zealand cities: Christchurch, Wellington, Waitakere City and North Shore city³ (Badland et al., 2009). The project, entitled the URBAN study⁴, follows the IPEN

2 URBAN is the abbreviation for 'Understanding the Relationships Between Activity and Neighbourhoods'.

3 Since the 1st of November 2010 the four cities of the Auckland metropolitan area (Manukau, Waitakere, Auckland and North Shore city) are under one administration, the Auckland Council.

4 The project was funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand for a three-year grant period (Grant # 07/356).

protocol⁵ to reveal (in)activity on a population level stratified by high and low walkable areas and can be broadly placed into the research on 'obesogenic environments' (Lake et al., 2010, Swinburn et al., 1999). The study aimed to improve the understanding of the relationships between (in)activity and objective and subjective built environmental features to inform policy changes. The URBAN project was a response to decreasing levels of activity in adults and children and associated health risks that are linked to environmental characteristics in the widest sense (e.g. urban design, street furniture) (Lobstein et al., 2010, Pearce and Witten, 2010).

In this thesis I turn to the *social* sciences to find explanation for (in)activity under the umbrella of the structure-agency debate to discuss enabling and constraining characteristics of outdoor play. In this respect, I examine societal and neighbourhood factors along with the practices of local agents to discuss "both the structural and agential dimensions of social reality [for a] place[d]-focused" on children's outdoor play (Blacksher and Lovasi, 2012: 177). The placed focus is gained from two contrasting neighbourhoods. Beach Haven is a study location included in the URBAN project and represents a suburban context for play. I chose to contrast this locality with the central city which is residentially dominated by apartments. The majority of studies only research the realities of suburban environments (Christensen et al., 2018, Tranter and Freeman, 2015, Whitzman and Mizrachi, 2009). However, by choosing these two study sites, I adhered with the overall aim of the URBAN study to stratify neighbourhoods by walkability. Thus, I compare the social reality of play in two highly walkable neighbourhoods in the Auckland region.

AIM

This thesis employs a mixed-method approach informed by Bourdieu's (2000) theoretical and methodological principles that are combined with perspectives of Gibson's (1979) affordance theory. The aim is to consider how children's seasonal play practices shape and are shaped by their locational, social and historical compositions and contexts to showcase that play is spatially and seasonally diverse within and across different localities. By considering more deeply the structure-agency interplay in children's seasonal outdoor play practices, I explore the potential for these practices to be reflected in an 'outdoor play habitus', a 'hibernating outdoor

5 The IPEN (International Physical Activity and the Environment Network) follows the same study-protocol in at least 14 countries to estimate strengths of association between detailed measures of the built environment and physical activity in adults. Results are intended to support the advocating of evidence-based national and global environmental and policy changes (IPEN, 2012).

play habitus’ and a ‘curtailed outdoor play habitus’ each consisting of its own internal practical logics and symbolic capitals that is needed to master what Bourdieu calls the ‘game’ in the ‘field of (outdoor) play’. In the context of Auckland, New Zealand, and in particular by comparing the highly walkable suburban setting of Beach Haven with the heart of central Auckland, I am concerned with the placed and seasonal detection, actualisation and experiencing of play opportunities (affordances) in children’s neighbourhoods. I am interested in how families manage contemporary social realities of seasonal play, and how their habitus and capital is structured and, in turn how it structures, the (socio-historic) ‘field of play’. To this end, I draw on the works of social (health) researchers, urban designers and town planners as well as the behavioural sciences and cultural ‘climatic’ geography. However, the most influential disciplinary perspective in this thesis is (urban) children’s geographies. I interlink these diverse (conceptual) approaches through a Bourdieusian lens. However, this lens is at the same time a geographical lens. I read Bourdieu’s approach informed by the history of my academic journey as a geographer. This application of a geographical lens ultimately leads to a ‘holistic’ and interdisciplinary approach to Bourdieu and the thesis as a whole⁶. The net result is not only an inter-subdisciplinary view (e.g. climate, urban and children’s geographies), but also a viewpoint that draws on knowledge from across other disciplines (e.g. exercise science, planning, social health sciences). By following my geographically informed approach, I assert that a placed focus on structural and agential dimensions of these core components of children’s seasonal outdoor play can provide nuanced views on children’s seasonal outdoor play patterns. Such a placed focus can help unpack the deeper meaning of play activities in an intensifying urban environment by considering the locational, societal and historical contexts and compositions that are (re)shaping these patterns.

6 In the following I only refer to a Bourdieusian lens, but this lens has to be read from my own disciplinary and personal positionality (see Chapter 4). Further, in Chapter 3 I introduce how I intertwined Bourdieu’s and Gibson’s approach, but refer hereafter only to a Bourdieusian lens that embraces my blended Bourdieusian and Gibsonian approach unless a distinction is warranted.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The broad area of inquiry that underpins the thesis can be broken down into a number of more specific research questions that I address:

- Where and with whom do children in an intensifying and highly walkable urban environment (central city, suburban) spend their (play) time? Do their roaming patterns vary within, between and across localities and seasons?
- Which historical, social and built environmental conditions shape parents' and children's views on 'appropriate' (seasonal) outdoor play and structure children's pastime?
- What kind of 'profits' do children and parents evaluate as enabling or constraining elements for experiencing independent (seasonal) outdoor play in their neighbourhood? What does children's 'environmental literacy' look like?
- How are the neighbourhood environment, societal beliefs and families' play practices intertwined? In which ways do families' play dispositions influence their evaluation, actualisation and experiencing of (potential) affordances in their neighbourhood environment? How is the embodiment of play dispositions and families' symbolic capital reflected in children's detection of (seasonal) affordances?

I address these questions through a mixed-method approach. This chosen approach allows accounting for the structure-agency interplay that shapes children's play. The empirical investigation comprises two phases. The main data collection stage involves conventional (elicited drawings, semi-structured interviews, surveys, travel diaries) and unorthodox forms of ethnographic research (GPS logs) in the two study areas in the summer and winter of 2010. In the course of conducting these parts of my research children became increasingly engaged beyond the normal character of a researcher-participant relationship. It became clear that a second phase was warranted and that this phase could be led by the children themselves. So, in this stage they became *de facto* researchers and we cooperatively analysed their previously collected data on two days at the end of 2010. In addition, local children took non-local children from the suburb and the central city respectively on a (child-)guided neighbourhood tour. More detail is presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

The resultant data sets were then analysed through a Bourdieusian lens and this process demonstrated the importance of telling individual stories that are embedded in the physical location of neighbourhoods, wider societal structures and climatic conditions. I contend that the play practices of children within individual families may be unique in terms of their particular content (stories), but they are shared in their structure with others of the same social 'play class'. Members of one 'play class' share structurally similar positions within the 'field of play' that provoke structurally

similar experiences of outdoor play and its processes and structures. However, by emphasising the importance of the physical location in which these social realities of outdoor play are situated, I argue that the affordance theory can shed some light on the underutilised aspects of physical locations in Bourdieu's work (Lossau and Lippuner, 2004, Painter, 2000). Affordance theory has been applied frequently in the context of children's play spaces (Änggård, 2016, Heft, 1988, Kyttä, 2004, Loebach and Gilliland, 2016a) and I argue in Chapter 3 that this theory can extend Bourdieu's spatial lens.

As already suggested, this thesis could have been ultimately situated in any of the other disciplines on which I draw. However, I argue that a placed geographical view on the contexts and compositions of urban children's outdoor play is central in an attempt to enrich the discussions on addressing and reducing the frequency of children's 'obesogenic environments'. In doing so, I expand the traditional view on 'obesogenic environments' by introducing the term 'obesogenic landscapes'. This is an alternative term chosen to indicate that landscapes are always in the making and replete with meaning; they are not simply the 'canvas' in front of you, but build the physical arena in which practices are shaped by, and reshape, physical and societal structures of play environments. Utilising this term allows me to move beyond the relationships between activities and physical environments. Indeed, it offers the possibility to discuss how physical and societal structures (re)shape both the practices and the environments in which play activities take place.

PLACING 'OBESOGENIC LANDSCAPES'

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions. At a global scale, at least 1.5 billion adults and nearly 43 million children (under the age of five) were overweight in 2010 (WHO, 2012). In the New Zealand context and at the time of writing the thesis, one out of five children is deemed to be overweight according to the New Zealand Health surveys (Ministry of Health, 2008)⁷. Obesity and being overweight have been linked to various health threats such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, some types of cancer and musculoskeletal disorders as well as poor psychosocial outcomes such as depression (Goran, 2017, Lobstein et al., 2010). Children's well-being is not only threatened by the spectre of obesity through childhood, but negative aspects are also likely to be transposed into adulthood (Hertzman and Power, 2004, Whitaker et al., 1997).

7 The annual updates on key results for obesity in children aged 2–14 years indicates that one in nine children were obese (11%) in 2011/2012 and 2015/2016, which is an increase of almost 3% from 2006/2007 (Ministry of Health, 2016).

From a physiological perspective, obesity and being overweight are the result of an energy imbalance: caloric intake outbalances expenditure (physical activity) (Black and Macinko, 2008, WHO, 2008). However, multiple determinants cause obesity beyond the simplicity of this equation (Gluckman et al., Kumanyika et al., 2002, Swinburn et al., 2011). Obesity rates vary between individuals and this can be linked to biological, socio-economic, behavioural or psychological factors; all are seen as triggers for the development of this disease (Pearce and Witten, 2010, Poortinga, 2006, Waters et al., 2010). Obesity and being overweight have emerged as and remain critical public health issues in New Zealand over the last decades (Ministry of Health, 2016, 2017) promoting strategies like 'HE-HA' (Healthy Eating Healthy Action), 'Mission on' (Clark, 2006, Ministry of Health, 2003) or 'Push Play' (Green, 2013). However, the prevention and treatment for obesity has, for a long time, simply focused on pharmacological, educational and behavioural interventions on the individual level with limited overall success as its increasing prevalence within all age groups, socio-economic levels, genders and geographic locations indicate (Kohl et al., 2012, Lobstein et al., 2004, Merchant et al., 2007, OECD, 2017). While the above-mentioned interventions seem to be necessary, they do not appear to be sufficient to solve the obesity epidemic (Hallal et al., 2012, Lobstein and Jackson-Leach, 2016).

A more recent approach to addressing obesity is to link individual characteristics and behaviours such as dietary and physical activity patterns with the wider environmental characteristics (e.g. (non)walkable (suburban) environments) in which people live, work, eat, and play. The research focus has shifted to environments which promote a sedentary life-style and high energy intake: 'obesogenic environments' (Public Health Advisory Committee, 2008, Swinburn et al., 1999). The relationship between the built environment and obesity has especially attracted the attention of researchers from a range of disciplines, including geography, psychology, planning and urban design as well as sports and exercise science and nutrition (Goran, 2017, Lake et al., 2010, Pearce and Witten, 2010). At times, these researchers also include weather or climatic conditions as an environmental feature impacting on outdoor activities (Baranowski et al., 2013). However, these environmental characteristics are frequently viewed as external barriers structuring participation in outdoor activities. Indeed, such research is population-based and large scale using mainly quantitative methods (e.g. surveys, accelerometers, Geographical Information Systems analysis) (Kornides et al., 2018, Tucker and Gilliland, 2007).

Nevertheless, studies have begun to emerge that focus on children's and adolescents' social and cultural environments in diverse environmental settings and have the goal of examining (non)participation in active pastimes (Babb et al., 2017, Burrows, 2010, Hume et al., 2005, Trost et al., 1999, Veitch et al., 2007). Differences have been shown by age, sex, ethnicity and socio-economic status as well as in

diverse urban environments (Davison and Lawson, 2006, Faulkner et al., 2015, Holt et al., 2009, Kelty et al., 2008). Some researchers even question per se the classification of bodies in healthy/unhealthy and stress the politics surrounding the governance of fatness and the multiple experiences of different bodies (Colls and Evans, 2014, Dagkas and Burrows, 2016, Evans, 2010, Evans and Colls, 2009, Gunson et al., 2016). Such research attempts to overcome an otherwise narrow understanding of social context in prevalent approaches to obesogenic environments (Oliver and Schofield, 2010, Panter et al., 2008, Swinburn et al., 1999) to explain the differences in and experiences of (in)activity.

Despite an increasing focus on social determinants and context-related explanations, acknowledging the value of social theorising for understanding the relationships between ‘obesogenic landscapes’ and (non)participation in activities is still in its infancy (Andrews et al., 2012, Dagkas and Burrows, 2016). A key contribution in this direction is Kearns’ (2010: 279) incorporation of a broader picture on the creation of ‘obesogenic landscapes’ that argues for physical activity being viewed beyond a simple context-dependent behaviour “rationally chosen by individuals”. Discourses, for example, are also one aspect “of social structure that constrain agency in a less visible, but no less forceful, way than does the built environment” (Kearns, 2010: 279). Similarly, Blacksher and Lovasi (2012: 177) come to the conclusion that a “placed-focus” on physical activity, which accounts for the structural *and* agential dimensions of social realities, will be “more effective” in tackling the obesity epidemic than traditional approaches. This thesis is embedded in this recent perspective and aims to shed light on the relationships between activity (here formal and informal play), neighbourhoods and agents. Furthermore, the seasonal aspect is not viewed as an external barrier, but rather is grounded in everyday experiences. I draw in this regard on cultural (climatic) geography (Hitchings, 2010). In doing so, my approach attempts to reveal the diverse characteristics and influences shaping children’s placed play under the umbrella of ‘obesogenic landscapes’.

With this context in mind, I sought to obtain children’s views on their placed outdoor play. Such a view is grounded in their everyday experiences and allows the researcher to deconstruct how their lived social reality (re)shapes their detection, actualisation and experiencing of seasonal outdoor play. In this perspective children are held to be the experts about their seasonal playing practices. The thesis argues a need to move beyond adult-centric views on outdoor play to integrate children’s experiences, definitions and conceptions of play into understanding their ‘obesogenic landscapes’ (Chawla, 2001, Freeman and Tranter, 2011, Holloway and Valentine, 2000, MacDougall et al., 2004). In turn, this argument implies that the traditional methods (e.g. large scale measures) used in revealing ‘obesogenic environments’ are not sufficient. Children’s geographies is a sub-discipline that unpacks and develops methods to include and acknowledge children expertise on issues concerning their

everyday life and it is to this discipline that I turn for methodological guidance (Holloway and Valentine, 2000, Kraftl et al., 2012, van Blerk and Barker, 2008). However, listening to children's voices is not sufficient. Many of their perceptions of outdoor play practices are mediated through parents and the society in general as well as the localities in which play occurs (Holloway, 2014). My focus therefore also included parental voices with a particular interest in how their symbolic capitals and habitus (re)shapes the play habitus⁸ of their children. Hence, my aim is to literally 'play around' children's outdoor activity both theoretically and methodologically. As the introductory quote to this chapter suggests, I discuss the emotions that children experience playing outdoors, but within the contexts that shape and alter children's seasonal outdoor play. I now turn to place the historical and methodological underpinnings of my thesis within the sub-discipline children's geographies; the 'playground' for my encounters with children's placed seasonal outdoor play.

MOVING BEYOND PASSIVE PARTICIPATION WITH CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHIES

Over the past 40 years a vibrant and creative subdiscipline of children's geographies has emerged (e.g. Evans et al., 2016, Harker et al., 2017, Holloway, 2014, Holloway and Valentine, 2000, Holt, 2011, Kraftl et al., 2012, Nairn et al., 2016, Worth et al., 2017). Researchers in this field try to overcome the discrepancy that sees adults creating environments for children invariably without consulting children on their environmental needs, ideas and wishes (Ergler et al., 2015, Freeman and Tranter, 2011, Spencer and Blades, 2006). Children's geographers, therefore, aim to work with young participants instead of on their behalf, in order to reveal, create and design truly children's environments.⁹ I sketch the long walk from *observing children* to *children as researchers* in the following paragraphs as one way to illustrate the increasing acknowledgement of children as competent actors and to unpack their lived social realities.

8 By drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus I can unpack both the societal components and contexts shaping a certain habitus, but also the agential immanent dispositions, the parental points of view. However, these agent-bound practices always need to be viewed in the wider context of the 'field of play' (see Chapter 3 for more details).

9 The term 'children's environments' encompasses in this context the multiple realities of childhood by acknowledging that children are not one homogenous group, whilst their childhoods are structured by societal norms and rules. Therefore, children's environments are not limited to the physical, haptic environments. For reviews see Smith and Ansell (2009), Skelton (2009), Katz (2009) and Holloway(2014).

The different ways in which geographers have contributed to understandings of the many worlds of children's environments reflects shifts in geography more generally: from geography as a positivistic spatial science to geography as a fully *social* science emphasising subjectivity, experience and meaning of places.¹⁰ Two studies in the 1970s (Blaut and Stea, 1971, Bunge, 1973) paved the way for a further development of "Children's Geographies" as a research field. Studies by Blaut and colleagues brought children into the research agenda of geographers, but these were highly influenced by positivistic ideas in seeking to explore children's experiences and mapping skills (Blaut, 1987, Blaut and Stea, 1971). This work researched children's spatial literacy and initiated geographical research on children's developmental stages (Blaut, 1987, Blaut and Stea, 1971). Matthews (1985) followed in Blaut's footsteps and showed Piaget's (1997) misconception of children's development in relation to mapping abilities. In contrast, and inspired by the emerging social turn in geography, Bunge's (1977: 336) "[g]eographical expeditions" applied qualitative methods to reveal children's well-being in an urban environment and to highlight inequalities in people's everyday geographies in deprived areas. Other geographers (e.g. Hart [1979]) followed his example in employing a humanistic approach when researching children's experiences. These researchers drew upon the research methods of environmental psychology and ethnography (e.g. participant observation) to explore children's place experiences, their independent mobility, their understanding of environmental processes and cognitive mapping abilities. Research examples which influenced geographers include Ward's (1978) work on inner city slums in London in the 1970s and Lynch's (1979) work on growing up in cities. These early studies were highly descriptive in origin, but provided an in-depth perspective on children's environments.¹¹ Nonetheless, children were (unintentionally) objectified in the research process. For instance, Bunge describes observing children's behaviour as "similar to bird watching" (Bunge, 1973: 336).

This flaw of objectification, which also implies failing to take children seriously as competent actors, was acknowledged at the beginning of the 1990s when researchers increasingly highlighted children¹² as experts on their own lives

10 This characteristic is also true for the 'new geographies of climatic accommodation', which are introduced in more detail in chapter two and factored out in this introductory chapter as children's views are still absent in these.

11 The work presented here is inspired by these early studies, but amended in various ways acknowledging the named flaws of these early studies, which could however only have been made from my contemporary knowledge and perspectives on children's play.

12 The term "children" in this thesis follows the definition of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines a child as "a human being below the age of 18 years"

(Christensen and O'Brien, 2003, Christensen, 2000, Holt, 2004). Informed by feminist and postmodern thought most of these studies promoted work *with* children instead on their behalf (Cele, 2005, Driskell, 2001, Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Children became participants and co-researchers (Barker and Weller, 2003a, Christensen, 2004b, Hemming, 2008) and some studies explored the potential of children *as researchers* (Alderson, 2000, Ergler, 2017a, Kellett, 2005, Porter et al., 2010b) to overcome the (unintentional) objectification of children through the choice of methodology. Consequently, qualitative, child-centred methods (e.g. in-depth interviews, elicited drawings, radio shows) have been developed, refined and further explored during this period for a deeper understanding of children's environments and the struggles they face (Barker and Weller, 2003b, Cope, 2008, Holt et al., 2016, Punch, 2001, van Blerk and Kesby, 2013).

In the beginning of the 1990s geography was more a follower than a pioneer on children's interactions with their environments, which was surprising as place/space interactions are a core concern of geographers. This neglect led to Sarah James' (1990) essay "Is there a place for children in geography?", which has been answered with various special issues in journals such as *Area* and *Geografiska Annaler* and by numerous edited books¹³ (Holloway and Valentine, 2000, Holt, 2011, Kraftl et al., 2012, Skelton and Valentine, 1998). At the same time it became hard to distinguish between studies from different disciplines that undertook research with children. As a consequence, studies have often been summarised under the interdisciplinary 'new social studies of childhood' (James and Prout, 1990). These studies discuss new approaches in theorising and exploring childhood and children's lives from disciplines including, anthropology, sociology, education and social policy (Chawla, 2001, James et al., 1998, Katz, 2004, Porter et al., 2010a).

Two helpful trends contributed to the popularity of children's geographies (and the new social studies of childhood). Firstly, the call to empower children to participate as full citizens in political, social and economic life was fostered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1995). This convention put children on the political agenda or at least obliged bureaucrats to consult children on decisions that might affect their lives. However, as Spencer and Blades (2006) highlight, the environments in which children play are often designed by adults and, in the worst case, are relict spaces left over from the adult world. Theory and practice do not often match. Secondly, seeing young people as competent

(UNICEF, 1995). I acknowledge that this encompasses different stages of childhood, but my participants were all 8–11 years old.

13 Despite the popularity of compiling special editions on children's geographies such an endeavour runs the risk of making children's geographies exclusive for children geographers instead of highlighting the impact of studies on the wider research community as the emphasis lies on children instead of topical themes (Skelton, 2009).

social actors who transform their own social worlds was promoted (Christensen, 2000, James et al., 1998, Jones, 2001, Kraftl et al., 2007). It mirrors the changing perspective on children's status in society (James and Prout, 1997, Valentine, 2004): children are capable social actors and should not simply be addressed as invisible agents and as part of a group such as a family or learning institution (James et al., 1998, Matthews, 2001a, Valentine et al., 2001). Children and childhood then are not viewed as universal and uniform, but diverse, influenced by socio-economic aspects and historical understandings as well as the geographical location in which children are placed (Horton and Kraftl, 2018, Philo, 2000, Smith and Ansell, 2009). Therefore, the ways in which children's lives are structured by our adultist society and resulting power struggles should remain a central reflection for understanding children's worlds (Gallagher, 2008, Holloway, 2014, Holt, 2004, Matthews, 2001a).

Inspired by the work of many children's geographers, I argue, that in order to be able to move to a deeper engagement and better understanding of 'obesogenic landscapes', we need to reveal the 'struggles' children and parents are caught up in, the norms and rules structuring their practices, besides the place-based landscapes in which activities take place. In other words, I argue for a move beyond aspatial and aseasonal discussions about children's 'obesogenic landscapes' to focus on place-based structures and practices embedded within wider societal norms and practices. I place my approach within the historical and methodological embeddings that emerge from 'obesogenic landscapes' and children's geographies research. In my approach I build on these perspectives by adding to Bourdieu's (2000) interdependent and co-constructed trio of field, capital and habitus as well as the affordance theory initialised by Gibson (1979).

Before I move on to define the key terms in this thesis, Table 1 below summarises the key approaches and contributions from selected disciplines, which have informed my understanding of children's 'obesogenic landscapes' and on which I have touched in this chapter and will in Chapter 2. These come from children's geographies, social (health) researchers, urban designers, town planners, the behavioural sciences and cultural (climatic) geography.

DEFINING 'PLAY' AND 'PHYSICAL ACTIVITY': TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?

According to Dyson play is "multifaceted, diverse, and complex. It resists easy definition" (Dyson, 2008: iv). Indeed, there seems to be a lack of clarity with regard to any differentiation between the terms physical activity and play. Several authors who have written about playing or physical activity seem to assume that their readers know what playing and physical activity is and often use the term interchangeably (Alexander et al., 2014a, Hume et al., 2005, Pellegrini, 2011).

Generally, the term 'physical activity' is used in transportation, sport science and nutrition literature. It is defined as "bodily movement produced by the contraction of skeletal muscle that increases energy expenditure above the basal level" (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996: 20). Often, physical activity is analysed within the context it occurs—during periods of time spent in leisure, transport, home or other locations. To make it even more complicated, the terms 'physical activity, physical fitness¹⁴ and exercise¹⁵' are rather often used interchangeably but have different meanings which are not explicitly discussed in the literature. In 'children's geographies' and the social sciences more generally, the term 'play' is preferred to physical activity and the terms 'formal, informal and active play' are also used in behavioural and activity studies (Alexander and Conveny, 2013, McKendrick, 2014).

Play is often described as the 'creative, innocent and natural' aspects of children's activity. It is often defined as a purposeless behaviour that is enjoyable (Burghardt, 2011). However, play also carries the notion of development (Piaget, 1955a, 1962, 1997, Sutton-Smith, 1997, Winnicott, 1977). In this respect, play is seen as 'learning through play'. Children engage in play out of their own desire and often structure it by themselves. Play is defined then as the free-flowing manner in which children utilise a great variety of objects, languages and symbols to define their own rules.

Developmental psychologists have especially been fascinated by play as a means to foster development and enrich children's education as they exercise their own initiative, imagination and creativity (Göncü, 2009). For example, Piaget (1962, 1976, 1997) tied specific forms of play to specific ages and stages of cognitive development, whereby the child's development could be defined by the progress of play. In another example, Winnicott (1977) understands the developmental aspect of play involving children learning to defend themselves against anxieties. Hence, it enables them to cope with past and contemporary experiences of affective significance. However, play needs to be understood in relation to a particular time and place. As the context changes, so does play. Children's play can only be understood in its historical relation to the broader social, political and economic contexts that inscribe themselves into children's play practices (Ergler et al., 2013a, Roopnarine, 2011, Schwartzman, 1980, 2001, Sutton-Smith, 1981).

14 Physical fitness can be defined as the "ability to carry out daily tasks with vigor and alertness, without undue fatigue, and with ample energy to enjoy leisure-time pursuits and to meet unforeseen emergencies" (Caspersen et al. 1985; Pate 1983). The term can be used to describe either athletic- and performance-related fitness or health-related fitness (DHHS 1996).

15 Exercise can be defined as "physical activity that is planned, structured, repetitive, and purposive in the sense that improvement or maintenance of one or more components of physical fitness is the objective" (Caspersen et al. 1985).

In this thesis, play is viewed very broadly and also encompasses children's own definitions which incorporate active and sedentary, and formal and informal characteristics of activity. Each child defined their understanding of play differently, but within the limits of their habitus. Similarly, inspired by a Deleuzian framework Harker (2005: 57) argues that play is "irreducibly an embodied activity". To fully understand the specificity and complexity of play it is important to take the "contingent role [of] objects, sounds, ideas and socio-cultural habits" into account. I also draw on this argument and extend it so that not only habits, but also Bourdieu's triad of field, capital and habitus should be considered when we aim for deeper insights into the structures (in)forming children's play performance and their ability to bypass and influence these structures through their play performance. This approach allows me (following Harker) to consider much broader conditions and mechanisms constituting different playing performances.

However, for a more practically based operationalisation of play, I draw on MacDougall and colleagues (2004: 381f) whose research can be located between physical activity research and children's geographies and embraces similar interests to that of the study at hand. Derived from focus group discussions with children, play in their definition represents activities that are 'owned' by children and involves spontaneous decisions and children's own norms, rules and practices. Play embraces activities associated with fun and spontaneity. Play contrasts with boredom. Play is often cooperatively carried out with friends, which enhances children's excitement for play further and also connects children with their wider community; their attachment to places. Play carries the connotation of the absence of competition and aggression. Children creatively and naturally utilise the available facilities and equipment to adjust them to their play needs. I further suggest that children not only utilise the available play spaces (adult prescribed play settings), but also transform the 'placelessness' of ordinary environments for their needs (Relph, 1976). There are, as Duff (2011) asserts, many 'enabling places', to engage in play¹⁶, not only the 'institutionalised' ones such as playgrounds and parks.

While the term play embraces the notion that adults do not direct and only sometimes stimulate play, sport or physical activity is viewed as owned by adults, as they direct and provide the necessary resources. These activities take place in defined settings and are less child-focused than independent outdoor play. In these play contexts children need to follow the norms and rules of the adult world. In the thesis I extend this view not only to sporting activities, but to all adult-supervised activities such as extra-curricular activities or after-school-care.

16 I cater for this aspect in the study at hand through the inclusion of the affordance theory.

CONCEPTUALISING 'ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY'

The concept of 'environmental literacy' encompasses children's awareness and knowledge about their (natural) surroundings. Maps have often been used to test children's spatial awareness and to produce a spatial representation about their understanding of the world, place attachment to and relationships with their surroundings (Alarasi et al., 2016, Blaut, 1987, Freeman and Vass, 2010, Hart, 1979). Given the complexity of children's maps that often show their roaming patterns *and* social aspects of their lives, they require explanations from the artists themselves (Cele, 2006, Moore, 1986). However, many researchers focus only on the spatial literacy of children, the accuracy of how they represent their movements in space on a two-dimensional map (Badland et al., 2011a, Holt et al., 2008, Hume et al., 2005). The term 'environmental literacy' can also be read beyond the notion of spatial literacy. In environmental education the term 'environmental literacy' became popular around the 1970s and emerged from a concern about the sustainability of current behaviours and management of environmental resources (Roth, 1992). Researchers saw a need to 'educate' people on how human interactions with the environment were (and are) affecting the planet's health (Berkowitz et al., 1997, McNeill and Vaughn, 2012). The term in the broadest sense encompasses a person's ability and willingness to critically think about and assess environmental issues; to make and take informed and responsible decisions about solving these problems (Hawthorne and Alabaster, 1999, Monroe, 2003, Roth, 1992).