

Abstract

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The study is about young people and public life. The public is investigated both theoretically and empirically and different perspectives on the distinction between public and private are presented and discussed. The theories are then applied to the public life of youth. Empirical data has been collected in order to answer questions like: How is the public life among young spread out and patterned? What social structures and interplay can be defined? Which social problems occur in the public? Is the public an environment for learning?

The study combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach when it comes to data collection. Data have been gathered through interviews, observations and a questionnaire. The young people who took part in the investigation were all between 13 and 18 years old. A total of 988 respondents answered the questionnaire. 21 interviews were conducted with totally 32 young people.

The results show that there are lots of gatherings in the local neighbourhood. In these gatherings, age is important. The younger, the more time spent out. However, the use of public space among young people varies a lot when different types of local areas are taken into consideration. The neighbourhood is normally a well-known area to young people, where they have been playing since they were small and developed networks of relations. One typical feature of the local public life is that it deals with passing borders and testing new things. In contrast to the local neighbourhood, the city constitutes an exiting place, full of new things to discover with its greater variety of meeting places and public amusements. In general, older teenagers spend more time in the city. Boys dominate the open space; the ones from the suburbs being the most active. Cafés, with ability to combine the intimate and the public, have become very popular during the last years, especially among girls. Special youth events have also been investigated in the study and it is shown that most young people participate in these celebrations and that the most common place for that is in the public. The results show that it is mainly girls who express feelings of discomfort in the public. However, girls with that experience do not spend much time in public places and have not seen many frightening situations by themselves.

The public sphere of young people is socially structured and organised. It is based both on solidarity and on distinctions between the young. It is possible to distinguish some general patterns when it comes to how youth use and move through different public places. The important thing to young people is the social structures within youthful public life. Both when young people have fun in public and when they experience fear it is in relation to other young people. The social structures are of vital importance for the understanding of the public life of young people.