‘Distilling materially the immaterial’: The variation of the (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and youngsters within the re-figuration of spaces

Ignacio Castillo*, Angela Million and Jona Schwerer
Department of Urban Design | Institute of Urban and Regional Planning | Berlin University of Technology, Germany

I. Introduction

The paper problematises one of the main “methodological axes” of a research project that analyses the notion of (subjective) spatial knowledge of both children and teenagers (see, inter alia, Piaget and Inhelder, 1967; Hart and Moore, 2017 [1973]; Lynch, 1977; Ward, 1977; Tonucci, 1996; Chawla, 2002) framed in the process of re-figuration of spaces. The starting theoretical assumption of such phenomenon is that the transformation of the social order becomes particularly clear when looking at the (re)structuring of spaces. Spaces, thus, are understood as relational arrangements of actors, objects and technologies – both placed and placing. These arrangements, moreover, are based on two analytically distinct social processes that synthesise specific practices of placing, referred to as spacing. Social changes are constantly leading to new forms of synthesising spaces and new dynamics of spacing, which, in turn, results in the spatial reorganisation of societies. Given that this process of rearranging and restructuring is, on the one hand, described from the perspective of the spatial and, on the other, regarded as fundamentally social and relational in nature, it is analysed as “re-figuration of spaces” (Knoblauch and Löw, 2017: 3-6).

Against this backdrop, the research project, more specifically, looks at the re-figuration of spaces from the perspective of children and adolescents, the generation of “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), and the production of their (subjective) spatial knowledge; to put it differently, it seeks to fathom out how the immateriality of spatial knowledge becomes ‘fixed’ in the materiality of spaces being constantly re-figured. The investigation aims to, first, reconstruct changes in the (re)appropriation and redefinition of educational spaces by children and adolescents, and the spatial knowledge involved therein since the 1970s. Building on these findings, it will subsequently explore how these changes in spatial knowledge are nowadays processed and rendered relevant (and therewith eventually integral) by professionals planning educational spaces.

The twofold methodology combines a qualitative meta-analysis (Novak, 2007; Sandelowski, 2004; Sánchez-Meca, 2010) of relevant literature (in German, English and Spanish), in order to grasp a sort of second-level empiricism, with two empirical case studies on planning and designing of non-formal educational spaces in both Latin America and Europe. The paper’s main objective is, given the nature of the symposium and as aforesaid, to emphasise the first of the two methodological dimensions of the research project. Thus, the qualitative meta-analysis, following Noblit & Hare (1988), is presented as a meta-ethnography of ethnographies that revolve around distinctive elements – which have been operationalised in the form of a coding system (or “code tree”) – connected with how the spatial knowledge of children and youngsters has been re-figured. In other words, a synthesis of both explicit and non-explicit interpretations, other studies have delivered, through ethnographically dealing with children and adolescents. To that end, the ‘anatomy’ of a meta-ethnography – steps, stages, dilemmas, challenges and potentials – will be outlined and elaborated upon, preceded and

*Contact author: i.castillo-ulloa@isr.tu-berlin.de
complemented by a few pertinent conceptual considerations. Afterwards, a snapshot of the onset of the meta-ethnography about the variation of the (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and adolescents within the re-figuration of spaces shall be provided, in order to very concisely illustrate the way a meta-ethnography may be performed. The paper closes with some succinct, general and, by all means, non-categorical reflections.

II. Considering the implications of (putting together) the pieces, before tackling the jigsaw

In order to get a general notion of what a meta-ethnography is and how it may be carried it out, it is important to briefly address some imbricated conceptual implications for doing (qualitative) synthesis research, provided that they constitute an undertow of the attitudes and idiosyncrasies that permeate and shape researchers and their wherewithal.

The “paradigm problem”: how’s research been usually synthesised?

According to Kuhn (1970: 175) a paradigm comprises “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community” as well as the exemplary “concrete puzzle-solutions” of the scientific community. In the social sciences, there have been two predominant paradigms: interpretivism (also known as “anti-positivism”) and positivism. Positivistic explanations are both causal and predictive (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982: 19) and seek conspicuous “cause-and-effects laws that are [...] generalizable to ensure that a knowledge of prior events enables a reasonable prediction” of ensuing events (Noblit & Hare, 1988: 12). Positivism rests therefore upon a rigorous deductive logic.

On the other hand, ethnographical, interactive, qualitative, naturalistic, hermeneutical or phenomenological research fall under the umbrella of interpretivism. Since all these kinds of inquiry show that contextual circumstances directly influence the connotations that may possibly be given to examined events, “interpretivists are dubious about the prospects of developing natural science-type theories or laws for social and cultural affairs” (Noblit & Hare, 1988: 12). In view of such particularity of interpretative research, it does not turn out be all that surprising that synthesis-research has been overwhelmingly positivistic, which, in turn, has impinged positivism on the ways and means of synthesizing knowledge and, what is more, the very knowledge that arises therefrom. This, for sure, begs the question of how knowledge is then (to be) “amalgamated”.

Synthesising knowledge: Positivistic carpentry, interpretative art

The synthesis of already performed research is, more often than not, equated with conducting a literature review. Literature reviews are usually regarded either as arguments of a specific analytical viewpoint or purview, or the reasons wherefore doing a particular investigation is worth1 (Weed, 2005). Furthermore, given the lack of analysis or evaluation they tend to evince, most literature reviews “in practice are more rituals than substantive accomplishments” (Noblit & Hare, 1988: 12). Meta-analysis was hence conceived under the perspicuous assumption that there were many small studies – for the most part, evaluations – that gathered general data; however, these studies proved, within time, to be too limited to give way to (positivistic) generalisations. Hunter et al. (1982:11), seeking to circumvent the recurrent trap of simply “averaging across studies”, brought to the fore the interpretative

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1 Typical examples are the ‘theoretical framework’ or ‘current state of the art’ that commonly precede research proposals, dissertations, or final research reports.
character that meta-analysis ought to have. In this respect, the calibration of the scope of a meta-analysis should be “topical rather than methodological” (Hunter et al., 1982: 166) and studies to be incorporated thus need not be included or excluded solely on the basis of a good-quality deployed methodology, for their worth may well also be stated during the very process of achieving a synthesis.

To wit, while the accumulation of data can be successfully obtained by way of positivistic instruments and methods, the linkage of knowledges and the explanation of its relevance does require the production of a (new) meaning – which cannot help to be but an interpretative act. All in all, the synthesis of knowledge is “essentially an interpretative [and inductive] endeavor” (Noblit & Hare, 1988: 16).

The (inherent) paradox of synthesis

The synthesis of knowledge contained in qualitative studies unavoidably entails a dual paradox: on the one hand, the meaning of synthesis and, on the other, the suitable strategies to be employed to acquire such meaning (Doyle, 2003: 322). In this regard, synthesis can, by and large, mean: (i) the combination of parts to form a whole; (ii) the dialectical mixture (à la Hegel) of thesis and antithesis; and (iii) the amalgamation of assorted conceptions to give rise to a concrete whole (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary). Noblit and Hare (1988) sustain that synthesis, in the light of the first definition, is an additive process; vis-à-vis the second denotation, a refutation (or even solution); and in the frame of the third acceptation, the undertaking of conceiving anew.

Some theorists, in a similar manner, interpret synthesis as an aggregation (Krathwahl, 1993); namely as “a process for accumulating knowledge relevant to a given topic, question, or issue and for showing interrelationships among the pieces of knowledge and the question or issue” (Ward & Reed, 1983: 11). Other authors ascribe to synthesis an interpretative component (Eisenhart, 1998; Noblit & Hare, 1988). Synthesis, consequently, is “usually held to be an activity or the product of activity where some set of parts is combined or integrated into a whole [...] [it] involves some degree of conceptual innovation or employment of concepts not found in the characterization of the parts as means of creating the whole” (Strike & Posner, 1983: 346). Seen like this, knowledge syntheses may take on a number of forms that are all inductive – based on evidence, interpretations are proposed.

Furthermore, interpretations are normally assessed according to three main criteria: (a) if they “clarify and resolve, rather than observe, inconsistencies or tensions between material synthesized”; (b) whether what has been interpreted results in a “progressive problem shift”; and (c) if the realised synthesis is “consistent, parsimonious, elegant, fruitful, and useful” (Strike & Posner 1983: 356-357). Synthesis, on such account, in the context of meta-ethnographies, does not mean generalisability, as in quantitative analysis; nor does it indicate “transferability of similar findings on a case by case basis but rather a reconceptualization across studies” (Doyle, 2003: 232). Next, it will be explained in further detail the way studies dealing, to varying degrees, with the production of (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and adolescents, are going to be “meta-ethnographically” reconceptualised.

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2 In this third criterion, while the questions of “parsimony” and “elegance”, being terms of an unmistakable subjective nature, their meaning is fairly ambiguous; elegant and parsimonious interpretations, it may be said, will have better chances to read consistent, fruitful and useful.

3 Such “reconceptualising character” of meta-ethnographies can be better comprehended, when meta-ethnography is contrasted with other synthesising methodologies (see table 1).
III. Grasping meta-ethnography, or, how to make sense of the hurly-burly of colliding voices

In the English literature qualitative meta-analysis is also referred to as “qualitative meta-synthesis” (Sandelowski et al., 1997), “qualitative-meta-data-analysis” (Paterson et al., 2001) or “meta-ethnography” (Noblit & Hare, 1988). All these nuanced types of qualitative analysis share the component of “meta”\(^4\) and signal, almost indefectibly, to analysis, synthesis and interpretation.

Qualitative meta-analysis is a distinctive category of synthesis in which findings from completed qualitative studies in a target area are formally combined. Both an analytic process and interpretative product, qualitative meta-analysis is analogous to quantitative meta-analysis in its intent to ascertain systematically, comprehensively and transparently the state of knowledge in a field of study (Sandelowski, 2004: 892; **bold** added).

A meta-ethnography tells itself apart from the other sorts of meta-analysing in that its approach is “an attempt to develop an *inductive* and *interpretative* form of *knowledge* synthesis” (Noblit & Hare, 1988: 16; *italics* added). In addition to that, it is recognised in the meta-ethnographic method the centrality of the “meaning in context” (Weed, 2005). Doyle (2003: 323ff.), when discussing “the paradox of methodologies”, points out that meta-ethnography can be distinguished by comparing it to two other methodologies that draw on the collection of studies: literature reviews and meta-analysis (see table 1). Meta-analysis, first coined by Glass (1976), operates on the basis of aggregating and subsequently synthesising pre-existing *statistical* findings, with the sole aim of foretelling outcomes for situations that have emanated from similar (and comparable) circumstances (Doyle, 2003: 324). Moreover, “using either an exhaustive collection of studies or a random sampling, researchers convert findings into a statistic (effect size) that numerically converts individual study findings into a form that can be compared across studies” (Doyle, 2003: 324). As Noblit & Hare (1988: 81) observe, whereas “meta-analysis synthesizes the data\(^5\)”, meta-ethnography “synthesizes the substance of qualitative research”.

Literature reviews, on the other hand, building on research findings that are linked linearly, attempt to produce “a research chain” (Krathwahl, 1993). Provided that synthesis may be regarded as the process whereby “integrating separate research projects into a coherent whole” (Cooper, 1998: 2), literature reviews fall into the category of synthesising research. Literature reviews, thus, are either “detailed independent works” or “introductions to reports of new data” (Cooper, 1998: 3), which seek to show the way(s) already conducted investigation may be coupled, retrospectively, with past theories and, prospectively, with forthcoming examination (Doyle, 2003: 324). To that end, literature reviews require careful reading and recapping of – in order to be able to bridge the gaps between — selected studies, with the explicit objective of delivering “logical, deductive rationalizations, conclusions, and calls for future research” (Doyle, 2003: 324). However, Noblit & Hare (1988: 14-15; *italics* in the original) sustain that the “study-by-study presentation of questions, methods, limitations, findings, and conclusions”, that literature reviews normally encompasses, “lacks some way to

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\(^4\) The prefix “meta”, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, may mean “occurring later than or in succession to”, “situated behind or beyond” and “later or more highly organized or specialized form of”. All these acceptations are, in one way or another, present in their conjunction with “analysis”, “synthesis” and “ethnography”.

\(^5\) “Data”, as Doyle (2003: 341) explains, entails diverse connotations according to the particular theoretical perspectives from which it is defined. From a “meta-ethnographical” point of view, data is conceived as the content – the textual material – of each selected case (Noblit & Hare, 1988).
make sense of what the collection of studies is saying”. In other words, literature reviews fall somewhat short, for no interpretation is provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Quantitative meta-analysis</th>
<th>Literature review</th>
<th>Meta-ethnography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Accumulation of findings for prediction</td>
<td>Progressive linking to form a (progressive) chain of reasoning</td>
<td>Reconceptualisation to contribute to human discourse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data process</td>
<td>Results of studies of the same research construct</td>
<td>Identified relevant theory and results in the literature</td>
<td>Findings and interpretations of existing case studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>Exhaustive collection or random sampling</td>
<td>Exhaustive review</td>
<td>Purposive sampling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Restating and aggregating quantitative data</td>
<td>Bridging summaries</td>
<td>Constructing (meta)interpretations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
<td>Generalisations</td>
<td>Logical rationalisations</td>
<td>(Meta)interpretations across case studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Comparing three forms of synthesising research | Source: adapted from Doyle (2003: 324).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Getting started”</td>
<td>An intellectual interest that could inform qualitative synthesis research is identified; usually, this constitutes the main subject of inquiry.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defining relevance to original interest</td>
<td>The selection of studies requires some justification. Hence, a criteria matrix, containing keywords that are connected with the research question(s), is to be prepared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading chosen texts</td>
<td>The phase can be defined as “the repeated reading of the accounts and the noting of interpretative metaphors” (Noblit &amp; Hare, 1988: 28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining relations among studies</td>
<td>Create and contrast a list of key metaphors, phrases, ideas and/or concepts – and their relationships – used in each study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translating the studies into one another</td>
<td>“Translation involves treating the accounts as analogies: One program is like another except... On the other hand, translation is more involved than an analogy. Translations are especially unique syntheses, because they protect the particular, respect holism, and enable comparison. An adequate translation maintains the central metaphors and/or concepts of each account in their relationship to other key metaphors or concepts in that account” (Noblit &amp; Hare, 1988: 28; italics in the original).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesising the translations</td>
<td>“When the number of studies is large and the resultant translations numerous, the various translations can be compared with one another to determine if there are types of translations or if some metaphors and/or concepts are able to encompass those of other accounts. In these cases, a second level of synthesis is possible, analyzing types of competing interpretations and translating them into each other” (Noblit &amp; Hare, 1988: 28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating the synthesis</td>
<td>A synthesis, to be effectively communicated, must not only be in an appropriate form, but also understandable concepts are to be used. In order to translate synthesis studies, the translations have to be rendered in the language of the audience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Basic steps of meta-ethnography | Source: adapted from Noblit & Hare (1988: 26-29).
A meta-ethnography, vis-à-vis meta-analysis and literature reviews, takes the analysis and synthesis a step further, because interpretations of singular cases allow new understandings of social conditions to come to the surface (Doyle, 2003: 325). Eisenhart (1998: 397), commenting on the need to render reviews interpretative, finds that revised studies, when tackled assembled, “enable us to grasp many more possibilities – for thought, action, and change –” as opposed to each one alone and, for sure, if (re)interpreted separately. Such “en masse-realised interpretation” eventually allows to conceptually reformulate what the cases included have already problematised in the form of a “first-order interpretation” (Britten et al., 2002: 213), given that a “meta-ethnography is an example of synthesis that moves toward reconceptualization. Like meta-analysis [and literature review], meta-ethnography utilizes multiple empirical studies, but unlike [them], the sample is purposive rather than exhaustive because the purpose is interpretive explanation and not prediction” or the achievement of a logical chain of reasoning (Doyle, 2003: 326; bold added) (see table 1). Meta-ethnographers, furthermore, “reconceptualize new interpretations for the collective that may differ remarkably from the components parts” (Doyle, 2003: 326). To that end, a meta-ethnography has a well-defined anatomy composed of the three major phases: case selection, analysis and synthesis, which are, in turn, constituted by seven consecutive steps (see table 2 and figure 1).

Disentangling a meta-ethnography’s configuration

Sandelowski et al. (1997), in order to both explain diverse methods for synthesising qualitative studies and clarify how meta-ethnography fits conceptually, came up with three overall categories: (i) aggregation across investigators; (ii) association by the same investigator and (iii) non-aggregation across investigators. Criteria employed by these authors to ground qualitative synthesis is the express inclusion of qualitative findings and their interpretations, rather than pooling, which deals primarily with raw data. A meta-ethnography, according to the above categorisation, is seen as non-aggregation across investigators and it enables, therefore, synthesis by dint of reconceptualisation and interpretation (Doyle, 2003: 326).

In a systemic manner, table 2 summarises the specific steps established by Noblit and Hare (1988: 26-29) through which the consubstantial interpretation and reconceptualisation, a meta-ethnography supposes, may be accomplished. Figure 1 shows diagrammatically the “procedural anatomy” of a meta-ethnography; as proposed by Monforte-Royo et al. (2012: 3) and sorted out by the phases Doyle (2003: 327) suggests. Doyle, furthermore, came up with some strategic enhancements for each of the stages:

Case selection. Meta-ethnography, akin to case study research, needs an appropriate case selection. Thus, “understanding the critical phenomena depends on choosing the case well” (Stakes, 2000: 446). Meta-ethnographers, previous to the definitive purposive choice of the cases, catalogue studies; using, for instance, a series of search terms derived from the “original interest”. Given the non-aggregative nature of a meta-ethnography, cases need not be sought on the basis of similar research viewpoints, goals, discoveries and/or interpretations. Instead, cases are filtered according to which ones “provide the most fruitful data for the research question” (Doyle, 2003: 327) and facilitate the furthermost “opportunity to learn” (Stake, 2000: 446; italics in the original). Miles and Huberman (1994: 29) sustain that cases ought to be chosen on conceptual, rather than representative, grounds. Case selection, Lincoln and Guba (1985: 223) point out, should follow a “maximum variation sampling”, event to the point of tracing negatives or extreme cases dissimilarities
Differences, rather than excluded, may be fully exploited through variation maximum sampling (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

More specifically, Noblit & Hare (1988: 27) explain that case selection ought to be guided by “what accounts are available [...] and driven by some substantive interest derived from comparison of any given set of studies”. Now, how is a set of studies to be determined? Doyle (2003: 329) points out that studies have to go beyond the sphere of mere description and, accordingly, incorporate analysis and interpretation drawn upon established theories and methods. Whether a theory is established is determined by its widespread acceptance in the literature; that is, “being extensively and favourably cited in the literature over a period of time [...] sufficient to permit the wide-ranging application of theories [...] sought” (Doyle, 2003: 329). Methodologies, likewise, are regarded as “settled” if they too have extensive reception and have been thoroughly employed. Verifying these two characteristics does require careful reading of cases found; that is, going beyond superficial glimpses of abstracts and key words.

Analysis. In a meta-ethnography what is analysed, it goes without saying, are texts imbued with rich interpretative material based on transcribed material. The content of initial studies, furthermore, are “the talk of the authors in their written interpretations” (Doyle, 2003: 330). This kind of texts, according to Atkinson & Coffey (1997), may be deemed as situated constructions susceptible to (further/new) analytical interpretation; i.e. a second-order interpretation. To that end, Noblit & Hare (1988) view “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a suitable mode of meta-ethnographic analysis, for it “provides the means to isolate, create, and code metaphors in pursuit of conceptual density” (Doyle, 2003: 330). Through the use of metaphors and working from the perspective of newly posed research questions a “translation” (the fifth step; see Table 2) for each chosen case can be done. “Data for these translations consist of textual units in either the original or newly created language”; however, it is important to note that “translation is not re-interpretation of the same question but rather becomes an interpretation through a new lens” (Doyle, 2003: 330, italics added). With those translations is with which meta-ethnographers can move on to the do the synthesis.

A meta-ethnography attempts to extract a novel learning from an assortment of single cases, which may well be seen as contradictory, given the marked tendency to aggregate similarities. Hence, meta-ethnographers must “ascertain where they are situated in [as well as towards] this theoretical conundrum” (Doyle, 2003: 331). When meta-ethnographers select a position as “key descriptors”, they manage to, at the same time, find a way out of such puzzle and a suitable way to translate and synthesise. While translating, one has to bear in mind, that “holding the words of the original authors throughout the writing of the translations preserves the particulars of each study longer allowing them to speak more directly to readers of the synthesis. When meta-ethnographers create new language during analysis, they place the integrity of the subsequent line of argument at risk [i.e., the synthesis]” (Doyle, 2003: 333).

Synthesis. The final phase of a meta-ethnography occurs when key descriptors are juxtaposed, comparative strategies deployed to interpret across studies and outcomes encapsulated in written form. The synthesis constitutes the interpretative linkage between the analysis of the selected group of cases and the meta-ethnographical research question(s). Moreover, synthesis, in contrast to the analysis,
is “the movement from viewing the cases as parts of a collection to viewing the collection as a whole” (Doyle, 2003: 335). The “synthesising moment” is precisely what renders a meta-ethnography worthwhile, which, in turn, relies on “its comprehensibility to some audience” (Noblit & Hare, 1988: 82). The level of comprehensibility will vary according to the line of argument that must, directly and transparently, relate to the material presented. Should the data be faulty or the connection between the data and the argument not evident, the study would consequently become implausible (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Meta-ethnographers following Atkinson (1992), may well increase comprehensibility through writing style and genre. Thus, by explaining “their place in the text”, authors of a meta-ethnography render their synthesis comprehensible, inasmuch as readers can grasp the extent to which the synthesis can either expand, by blatantly telling, or constraint, by intentionally omitting (Atkinson, 1992; Doyle, 2003: 336).

Figure 1. A meta-ethnography’s “procedural anatomy” | Source: adapted from Monforte-Royo et al (2012: 3; following Noblit & Hare, 1988: 26-29) and Doyle (2003: 327).

Meta-ethnography is no picnic, but is worth doing: Some challenges and potentials to consider

Qualitative research methodologies focus, for the most part, on the binary subject-object relationship, in which the researcher is typically the subject and the practitioners the object. Such relation is also hierarchical and denotes that the voices of the researchers are more relevant than those of the practitioners (Doyle, 2003: 338). As a result, a “crisis of representation” has arisen (Lincoln and Denzin, 2000), demanding that researchers actively incorporate “the Other” (Fine, 1994) in a researcher-researched-reader triangle (Doyle, 2003: 339). An alternative to encompass the Other is through investigations that further the integration of multiple voices. “By design, meta-ethnography includes the ‘Other’ because it
combines multiple voices to seek new interpretations” (Doyle, 2003: 339). However, this is not without risks, for meta-ethnography has a complex nature, given the diverse voices that it deals with – those of the case study participants, the ethnographers, and the meta-ethnographers – and multiple “case studies add more voices thus increasing the complexity so that rather than adding richness” it may lead to an unnecessary over-complication (Doyle, 2003: 329).

Another conundrum relies on the assessment of “the potential to conduct a synthesis that is underpinned by the same interpretative epistemology as much qualitative research, therefore remaining true to the epistemology of the research being synthesised” (Weed, 2005). Given the tension between (representative) sample size and epistemology (Weed, 2004), the dilemma is constituted then by the need to adhere to an interpretative epistemology while conducting synthesis research and, all the while, managing to aggregate a quantitative significant enough sample to render the synthesis – and its concomitant interpretation – worthwhile doing (Weed, 2005). Be that as it may, meta-ethnography, as a mode of synthesis research, operates on a logic of purposive data collection and seeks to reconceptualise by way of, so to speak, “meta-interpretations”. Hence, although the epistemology trap does not – and should not – vanish, the size of the sample can most definitively be relativised, for neither generalisations nor logical rationalisations is what a meta-ethnography pursues.

Card (2012: 23-27), though directly related to quantitative meta-analysis, discusses five criticisms usually levelled at synthesis research: (i) the amount of expertise needed to perform and understand the meta-analysis; (ii) quantitative meta-analysis may lack “qualitative finesse” in the evaluation of literature; (iii) “the apples and oranges” dilemma (it depends on whether conclusions are going to be drawn on the former or the latter; but, for sure, not on both); (iv) the “file drawer” problem (it is based on the possibility that the studies included in the meta-analysis are not representative of the studies performed, as studies that do not find significant or expected results remain unpublished); and (v) “garbage in, garbage out” critique (meta-analyses, whose primary studies are of inferior quality – i.e., those that are regarded as “garbage” – inevitably lead to conclusions of poor quality). In addition, the question if primary studies are to be compared or combined appears, bringing to the fore the issue of “limits” – of study design, of sampling and of methodological artefacts. While “these critiques were raised primarily against the early meta-analyses and have since been raised as challenges against meta-analytic (i.e., quantitative) reviews, most apply to all types of research syntheses” (Card, 2012: 27). Meta-ethnography, therefore, since it is concerned with achieving a synthesis, is touched, to a greater or lesser extent, by some of the aforementioned “predicaments” and “limits”. The way the case selection is made for a meta-ethnography, for instance, allows to elude the “garbage in, garbage out” critique as well as the “apple and oranges” dilemma. By the same token, how to deal with limits of study design and sampling have already been addressed.

Ultimately, meta-ethnography, just like almost any other research method, is chosen primarily because of the potential it offers. Meta-ethnography, following Doyle (2003: 340), grants the possibility to extend borders,

Meta-ethnography does not conceptually dismiss single case studies as locally bound. By reconceptualizing and synthetizing case studies, meta-ethnography compels us to acknowledge the importance of not only the uniqueness of individual cases, but also the uniqueness of collectives. Synthesis as conventionally conceived states that singular cases cannot escape the borders of their contexts. Meta-ethnography as a form of analysis and synthesis extends these borders.
Borders are meta-ethnographically surpassed through the communication across research groups, fields and knowledges, which signals the need of a (meta-ethnographical) conceptual language, whereby issues “previously isolated be brought into a new spatial relation, such that future dilemmas might use the conceptual language as a heuristic through which to rethink other questions and problems” (Meacham, 1998: 405). In looking for a “meta-ethnographical” conceptual language, meta-ethnographers, must unavoidably make sense of the hurly-burly of the different voices that are brought together in the analysis and synthesis process, so that “crosscutting” interpretations can be developed.

IV. Understanding meta-ethnographically the change of the spatial knowledge of children and youngsters and its spatial re-figuration – thus far

As it has been succinctly outlined in the introduction, the paper presents an overview of a research project aimed at examining how the (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and youngsters have varied since 1970s with respect to the re-figuration of spaces – such is the “intellectual interest” that sparkled the idea of conducting qualitative meta-analysis; or, as it has been expounded in the previous sections, a meta-ethnography. Now, since the investigation is part of an interdisciplinary collaborative research centre, organised around the premise that re-figuration of spaces happens everywhere in manifold ways, the aforesaid “getting started” (step 1) of the meta-ethnography has been deconstructed in a series of research questions. To that end, the questions were put together building on, to varying degrees, the following subthemes of the re-figuration of spaces: (i) the polycontexturality of spatial constitution, (ii) the mediatisation of communicative actions and (iii) the translocalisation of places (Knoblauch and Löw, 2017: 6ff.).

Then, a list of “search terms” was created using as a guide both the research questions and the three abovementioned subthemes. Cases began, thereafter, to be sought in diverse pertaining databases (online library catalogues, peer review journals archives, google books, and the like)\(^6\). A preliminary rough version of a “code tree” (that is, a coding system that gives way to the analysis), largely based on the list of search terms, was sketched to start off the reading of the texts and thereby the noting of (plausible) interpretative metaphors (step 3). As a result, it became clear that the filter for case selection and the code tree needed improvement and refinement. The inclusion/exclusion criteria being now employed responds to Doyle’s (2003: 329) proposal (in the preceding section elaborated) and a group of “beacon studies” are currently being read and coded using an already polished version of the code tree. Containing codes and sub-codes, the improved coding system has been formed in correspondence with the formulated research questions (see figure 2)\(^7\). As it can be easily noted, the direct/indirect relationships established between research questions and codes (and, by extension, sub-codes) already hints at eventual “interpretative metaphors” (step 3), possible relations among studies (step 4) and, to a lesser extent, potential translations of studies into one another. Whether a relation is deemed as “direct” or “indirect”, though it has been somewhat intuitively stated, conflate partial results (excogitated from texts surveyed and coded) and internal discussions of the research team\(^8\). Hence, limits between the basic

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6 Also, when what appears to be a suitable text has been located and consulted, its list of references is carefully reviewed to identify other possible fitting cases.

7 The experience of revamping the code tree showed the significance of the purposive character that permeates the idea of meta-ethnography as a whole – and not exclusively when it comes to data collection (see table 1). The purposive character of the code tree became much clearer when coupled with the research questions.

8 Incidentally, debating internally has revealed not only how misleading the criticism of the amount of expertise needed to perform and understand the meta-analysis actually is, but also the importance that, at least, more than two researchers are involved and, if possible, from different backgrounds (for it enriches discussions and, needless to say, analysis and synthesis).
steps of a meta-ethnography, though clearly delineated in table 2 and successively diagrammed in figure 1, are not as fixed as they seem to be; contrariwise, imbrications may well happen.

A synthesis, it is undoubtedly inferable, has not yet begun, for the coding of beacons studies is still ongoing and their subsequent analysis is yet to be done. This, it must be noted, actually constitutes an analysis and synthesis test, which indicates, again, that setting a meta-ethnography into motion is not necessarily a linear and chronological endeavour; rather it requires, as any other research methodology, iteration, trial and error and adaptability when difficulties are met. Such “testing element”, moreover, has turned out to be fairly pivotal to deal with limits (of both study design and sampling), dilemmas (particularly, the “garbage in, garbage out” one) and criticisms (sample size vis-à-vis epistemological consistency) meta-ethnography, as a research synthesis method, innately brings about.

In the ensuing and closing section of the paper, a few overall reflections are presented drawing on what has been grasped thus far, in regard to not only what conducting meta-ethnography entails, but also the variation of the (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and teenagers within the re-figuration of spaces.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How were and are spaces of formal and non-formal education of children and adolescents perceived, used and appropriated?

How do spaces of formal and non-formal education, from the perspective of children and adolescents, structurally differ from each other?

What significance has been and is attributed to spaces for educational processes by children and adolescents?

How was and is the spatial knowledge of children and adolescents made relevant within planning and implementation processes of spaces of education?

How does the pedagogisation of space become manifest in the spatial knowledge of children and youngsters and how are pedagogised/ising spaces perceived?

SPATIAL KNOWLEDGE (SPATIAL PERCEPTION)

USE OF SPACE

APPROPRIATION OF SPACE

TEMPORAL STRUCTURE

SPATIAL STRUCTURE

MOBILITY

CAUSE FOR CHANGE OF SPATIAL KNOWLEDGE

LEARNING PROCESSES

OF CHILDREN AND YOUNGSTERS

(FORMAL (SPATIAL) SETTINGS)

(INFORMAL (SPATIAL) SETTINGS)

(INSTITUTIONAL AGENCY)

(NOT-INSTITUTIONAL AGENCY)

MEDIA USE

PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

OF CHILDREN AND YOUNGSTERS

(TYPE OF PARTICIPATION)

(PHASE OF PARTICIPATION)

(INPUT OF CHILDREN AND YOUNGSTERS)

(DEALING WITH INPUT OF CHILDREN AND YOUNGSTERS)

HOW SPATIAL KNOWLEDGE IS CREATED (ONTOLOGY-EPISTEMOLOGY OF SPATIAL KNOWLEDGE)

HOW SPATIAL KNOWLEDGE IS IMPLEMENTED/OPERATIONAL (METHODOLOGY OF SPATIAL KNOWLEDGE)

DIRECT RELATION

INDIRECT RELATION
V. Open-ended, preliminary final thoughts

The (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and youngsters – the main subject of inquiry that triggered off the “intellectual interest” of the meta-ethnography being carried out – is likely to come across in existing literature; problematising a wide range of topics (perception of (in)security, identity formation, and a host of others) from diverse disciplines (psychology, geography, education, sociology, anthropology, amid others). Interestingly enough, meta-ethnography, as a synthesis research method, has been, as far as it has been noticed, widely implemented in areas such as public health, educational leadership and sports. There seems to be no meta-ethnographical experiences in fields such as planning, sociology and geography, which underlie the research project about the variation of the (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and youngsters within the re-figurations of spaces. Such condition indicates the “pioneering” feature a meta-ethnography may well have, for it provides reconceptualisations that, accordingly, enhance research, theoretical and practical debates, based on already conducted research. In other words, by distilling materially the immaterial interpretations that emanate from the encounter between voices contained in the selected cases, those of the ethnographers and those of the meta-ethnographers.

Regarding the main objective of the investigation, it is believed, broadly speaking, that unravelling meta-ethnographically the production of children’s and youngsters’ (subjective) spatial knowledge within the re-figuration of spaces shall shed light, on the one hand, on the evolution of how their subjectivities and identities are constructed through the use, cognition and appropriation of space. To that end, the meta-ethnography, in its analytical stage, pursues, among other things, to (re)interpret how histories, identities, values, symbols, and the like are inscribed on built space and how that, in turn, shapes the way knowledge about built space is gained and new inscriptions consequently are carved into it. On the other hand, meta-ethnographical reconceptualisations may well reveal new – or even the pervasion of routinised – forms of political praxis, wherein the (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and adolescents is made (ir)relevant (particularly, when assessing the implementation of spatial knowledge in the planning and designing of not only formal but also non-formal educational contexts). Therefore, the spaces of informal and formal education may well be seen as domains for the formation of a political subjectivity and praxis – which is too a suitable “interpretative metaphor”. The meta-ethnography attempts, in the long run, to spot those “crystallising moments” of the (subjective) spatial knowledge of children and teenagers; be it in the ways space is used, appropriated, transformed, disputed, etc. and “distilled meta-ethnographically” from existing cases by dint of “interpretative blind spots”.

Synthesising is, by far, the most challenging and delicate phase of a meta-ethnography. It is thus of vital importance, when undertaking second-order and even third-order interpretations, to avoid stumbling into the “universalisation” or “syncretism” quagmire; for neither of them suits to the goal of producing (meta)interpretations, but rather all-encompassing (meta)narratives. Meta-ethnography does not have to do with producing new mainstreams either. It is about realising that, sometimes, is far more fruitful and productive to pay closer and critical heed to what is already (partially) known, instead of seeking – let alone, forcibly producing – “ground-breaking” knowledge discoveries.
VI. References:


