**Making time – unstructured leisure among adolescents in socially vulnerable areas** (working title)

Till läsare och granskare/ To readers and reviewers,

Det här är ett pågående arbete med ett första utkast. Som du kommer se är visa delar ofullständiga och vissa saknas. Jag hoppas ändå att texten kan vara ett underlag för konstruktiv diskussion om hur arbetet kan utvecklas vidare.

This manuscript is an ongoing work with a first draft. As you will see, some sections are incomplete, and some are missing. Nevertheless, I still hope that the text can serve as a foundation for constructive discussion on how the work can be further developed.

**Abstract**

This article explores the activity of ‘hanging out’ [hänga] as a meaning-making, social activity among young residents in socially vulnerable neighborhoods.

Being idle in public spaces has historically had negative connotations. From old laws prohibiting loitering (Johnsson, 2016) to the implications of terms such as “street walker” (McRobbie, 2000), there have always been certain groups of people whose time and movements society has deemed it necessary to control.

Research has shown that adolescents hanging out in vulnerable or stigmatized areas often are viewed either as ‘*at-risk*’ (Lunneblad et al., 2023) or as *a risk* to the public (Puur et al., 2019). Just hanging out is often perceived as a wasteful or even destructive way for young people to pass time (Caldwell & Smith, 2006). Rather, both research and social work practice tend to argue for the importance of young people participating in structured activities, i.e. leisure activities developed and led under adult supervision (Berdychevsky et al., 2019; Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Ekholm, 2013).

This study is based on interviews with 16 adolescents residing in neighborhoods that are considered to be socially vulnerable. By looking into how adolescents in socially vulnerable areas discuss hanging out as a social activity, within and outside their residential areas, this article aims to explore conceptions of identity, (social) mobility, and ‘free’ time.

Keywords: Youth, leisure, respectability, ‘at-risk’

# Introduction

Historically just ‘hanging out’ in public has had negative connotations. Throughout history, various groups of people have faced societal efforts to regulate their time and movements, ranging from legal restrictions on loitering (Johnsson, 2016) to the stigmatizing implications associated with terms like ‘street walker’ (McRobbie, 2000). In research on youth and deviancy ‘just’ hanging out is argued to invite anti-social behaviour and is perceived as destructive way for young people to pass time (Caldwell & Smith, 2006). Instead, a large body of research emphasise the importance of young people engaging in structured activities under adult supervision (Berdychevsky et al., 2019; Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Ekholm, 2013).

Still, other studies suggests that this unstructured, flexible and sometimes spontaneous practice provides a framework for identity work in which young people can engage in both seeing and be seen by the world around them (Matthews et al., 2000; Thomson & Philo, 2004). When in public, hanging out makes visible the hidden rules that governs interaction in public spaces (Tani, 2015). It can be understood as a democratic use of common space that challenges adult and discursive conventions around proper behaviour in public spaces (Matthews et al., 2000).

The aim of this paper is to delve into how the informal practice of **hanging out** shapes adolescents’ conceptions of identity, social mobility, and their use of ‘free’ time. In analysing participants’ accounts of hanging out, I draw upon the concepts of **respectability (Skeggs, 1997)** and **symbolic capital** (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013).

# Youth, leisure and risk

Previous research on young peoples’ leisure time is divided regarding what is seen as positive and constructive ways for children and youths to spend their time. On one hand there are studies arguing for the importance of young people participating in structured activities, i.e. leisure activities developed and led under adult supervision (Berdychevsky et al., 2019; Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Ekholm, 2013; Larson, 2000). Often with a focus on social- and self control, structured leisure is shown to foster the development of valuable skills that benefit young individuals both in the present and as future productive citizens. These skills include taking responsibility, respecting authority, and collaborating effectively with others. Moreover, introducing young individuals to structured activities not only exposes them to (new) interests but can also cultivate a sense of commitment and accomplishment outside of school. Within groups of peers, they can explore new roles, earn recognition, establish new friendships, and interact with adult role models (Berdychevsky et al., 2019; Ekholm, 2013). In addition, engaging young individuals in supervised leisure is seen as a way of keeping them occupied and away from destructive contexts where they can develop and engage in anti-social or deviant behaviour (Caldwell & Smith, 2006).

However, Caldwell and Smith (2006) also suggests that previous research has overlooked the positive values of unstructured activities and that these, in their own way, might enable youth to experiment with roles, behaviours and identities. Their suggestion opens up for a shift in perspective from social- and self control to one where young peoples are themselves capable of exploring social and environmental contexts as well as learning personal control, autonomy and cooperation together with peers.

Aitken (2001) argue that children and adolescents need time to ‘do nothing’ and to have time for unsupervised exploration of social and spatial environments. Particularly in the global north, young individuals’ time and social environments are increasingly organized and institutionalized by adults, making it challenging for them to find time and space to be on their own (Aitken, 2001; Tani, 2015; Thomson & Philo, 2004). Meanwhile, it is clear not all young people are able or want to take part in leisure experiences in the same way (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006).

More to be added…

# Theoretical perspectives: Respectability and symbolic capital

In examining young people’s understanding of issues of identity, (social) mobility, and ‘free’ time I delve into the concept of respectability, drawing inspiration from Skeggs empirical study of white working-class women and her engagement with Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital.

Respectability is a social construct that has a long been a marker of class and a standard to live up to (Skeggs, 1997, p. 3). In her study, Skeggs demonstrates how the idea of being ‘respectable’ is deeply entwined with social and cultural norms and moral standards. Historically, it has been closely associated with bourgeois ideals, but it should not be seen as a static notion. Rather, the construct of respectability evolves over time, reflecting changes in societal values and power dynamics. Moreover, respectability is a contested notion that to some extent is contextual. What is perceived as respectable in a given context is influenced by intersecting social categories such as gender, class and ethnicity (Skeggs, 1997). Place is also a relevant factor as socio-spatial relations impact on how social power-structures are produced and upheld (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013; Wacquant et al., 2014).

In picking apart how respectability is conceived Skeggs make use of Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Skeggs, 1997) in which different aspects and attributes of an individual can be translated into different forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) that can be traded for status and recognition. Economic capital includes income and monetary and financial assets, and social capital is made up of social connections. Cultural capital can be sorted into three forms; embodied dispositions, cultural goods and institutional recognition e.g. educational qualifications (Moi, 1991; Skeggs, 1997). We inherit various forms of capital based on the social context into which we are born, and the tradability of symbolic capital is, to some extent, constrained by context and our affiliation with specific social categories. For example, financial assets or educational qualifications can be recognised capital in one context but not in another. In addition, social categories for example, class or gender operates as organising principles that enable or restrict how different forms of symbolic capital can be used in different contexts (Skeggs, 1997). For example, studies on young women in disadvantaged urban areas in Sweden and Denmark show how young women with migrant background establish their own forms of being respectable in resistance or rejection to what they see as normative Swedish or Danish perceptions of femininity (Ademi et al., 2022; Andersson, 2003). In a similar vein, other studies have demonstrated how children and youth acquire context-specific knowledge, which can be interpreted as symbolic capital within their local environments but might diminish in value within the broader context of adult society (Bunar, 2005; Willis, 1993).

# Method

This paper is based on a study in which 16 young individuals (age 14-18) from so called ‘vulnerable’ residential areas were interviewed about their experiences of growing up in their respective neighbourhoods. In this section I provide an outline of how the study was conducted and some of the methodological choices that were made. The study was approved by Sweden’s national ethical review board (ref.no. 2022-00929-01).

The 9 boys and 7 girls who partook in the study were all residing in residential areas located in the outskirts of a midsized Swedish town that had been classified by the municipality as ‘prioritised’. The classification served as a foundation for area-based development initiatives (as discussed by Grander et al., 2022) with the primary goal of enhancing overall conditions for youth within these neighbourhoods. Specifically, the focus was on preventing criminal activity. These initiatives placed a strong emphasis on providing meaningful leisure activities as viable alternatives to anti-social behaviour.

The participants were recruited through a social worker or youth counsellor whom they already knew. Those who had taken part in area based initiatives e.g., social activities, work opportunities and counselling and were recruited through these activities. All participants were offered to do follow up interviews, to which 6 agreed and, of those six, 3 also did a third interview. The follow up interviews were used to enable the participant to elaborate on their reflections and further explore specific themes. Interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission and transcribed. The interviews took between 40 minutes to 2 hours. All quotes in this paper have been grammatically adjusted to read more easily in English and all names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Additional efforts to anonymize participants has been through omitting details (names of places, organisations etc.) that could be linked back to any individual participant.

When the participants were invited to take part in the study they were, or were made, aware of municipality interest in their neighbourhoods which might have impacted on their answers. Wary of this possibility I strived to offer the participants an opportunity to freely explore themes that they themselves associated with their neighbourhoods. Usually, interviews began with participants describing their neighbourhoods. From there, the conversations would mostly follow their own train of thoughts, reflecting their diverse everyday experiences.

The analysis was made through a reflexive process of engaging with theory and empirical material. Initially the focus on hanging out followed a process of line by line reading and coding, inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). During this process I focused on what activities the participants described and what kind of relationships these activities were tied in with. Attention was paid to activities such described as ‘hanging out’, but also for example ‘talking’, ‘chatting’, ‘chilling’ and activities such as playing basket, soccer or studying or shopping as long as these activities where described as secondary to socialising.

The instances of hanging out were then critically examined using Skeggs (1997) notion of respectability leaning on Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital.

# Findings

Being with each other, often explicitly defined as hanging out, was the a prominent theme when participants talked about how they liked to spend their ‘free’ time. If they engaged in something else, for example, watching movies or playing sports and games, these sorts of activities were just the framework in which the socialising took place. Noa (14) and Fatima (15) conveyed what seemed to be a general perspectives on how the participants preferred to spend their time.

”Really, I think- for me the important thing is to be with each other. I like hanging out with people. Like this, or socialise. Then, it’s also real fun when we find stuff to do like watch a movie, eating together, watch a game, yeah. ” (Noa, 14)

”We check out clothes, buy clothes if we want to buy and eat out most of the time or we just walk around. Just enjoy, just hang out, with each other – so, enjoying each others company.” (Fatima, 15)

Hanging out mentioned both as planned activities and as small spontaneous breaks in between their daily activities, like while waiting for the buss. These small breaks gave the impression of serving as a social mortar that made their everyday obligations work out smoothly. Most of them however, talked about hanging out with friends as a specific activity that, although appearing spontaneous and flexible, still involved conscious considerations.

## Hanging out in public places and safe spaces

Some (mostly female) of the participants, acknowledged that social media played a role in enhancing their on-stage experiences. However, interestingly, they did not discuss their own personal use of social media. Instead, they expressed that seeing others post images of themselves casually hanging out in the ‘right’ locations and with the ‘right’ apparel caused them stress. It seems that social media, in this context, served as a source of pressure as well as a way of trading symbolic capital.

Some of the boys also acknowledged the importance of being seen in the right places or wearing the right apparel by their peers. In addition, they engaged in critical reflection regarding the potential drawbacks of conforming to these ideals. For example, I4 (15) talked about avoiding the police since what he was wearing could be seen as ‘criminal’ attire. In the quote below he recounts a situation where he was in the vicinity of a shooting in his neighbourhood and rushed home to avoid being spotted by the police.

” If you see me in the district centre, you hear a gun shot, would you not stop and frisk me? […] I had… it was not my clothes actually; it was my cousin’s clothes. I had borrowed an expensive vest, expensive eh… sweater and, really [they were] all his clothes.” (I4, 15)

Clothes capital that increases and decreases in value depending on the context, what is interesting here is the dichotomy between items that are in one instance desirable and in the next dangerous. I4 suggests that it’s his clothes that make him look suspicious and therefore puts him in a vulnerable position in relation to the authorities. Pointing out that it wasn’t in fact his clothes, can be read as a tactical move to distance himself from what has become negative capital. It resonates with how the tradability of symbolic capital is circumvent by social categories and discursive constructs. With another positionality his expensive clothes might have afford him benefits. In this context, respectability is intricately linked to a class, ethnicity and place, that does not permit the possession or display of expensive items. Consequently, when he defies this norm by exhibiting such items, it invites scrutiny.

A similar account came from Dawit (16). He worked part time for a local company and sometimes wore his corporate attire when hanging out with friends during breaks and after work. They usually just talked or listened to music at the small square at the district centre. In the quote below he reflects on how he and his friends and/or colleagues are seen when in corporate attire compared to their everyday clothing.

” I believe that it [wearing the company logo] is a good thing for us. Cause… we say for example that somebody sees us here [in the district centre] yeah, they’ll think ’those guys are criminals’. It’s just that kind of image you get. Then, when they see [the logo]. That looks better. For us, and for them […] it makes them calm like, they’ll think we’re cool guys […] You can see it in them. Really, you can see it in the way they look at you. That they are significantly higher up than us others. That we are down here (extending his hand, palm flat, towards the ground)” (Dawit, 16)

In this case, the clothes Dawit wears have the opposite effect, they legitimise his presence in the area. That being seen as criminal is “just the image you get” points to the strong discourse linking young men with migrant background in ‘vulnerable’ areas with criminal activity ((see for example Elsrud, 2008; Lindgren, 2009). The quote also captures the ‘slipperiness’ of hanging out (Tani, 2015). In contrast to being seen with a purpose, as an employee of a local firm, hanging out as an activity opens up for interpretation. Like items such as clothing, behaviours such as engaging in group conversations or enjoying music involves aspects that can potentially function as tradable capital in different contexts, but is in this situation circumvent by the discursive and social positions of the boys involved. These positions dictate how resources are perceived and whether they can be effectively leveraged. Thus, the negotiation of symbolic capital is intricately tied to the prevailing power structures and social hierarchies within a given setting. To transform from threat to respectability involves slipping into a (uni)form that conveys a respectable role and purpose as opposed to a what is otherwise seen as a questionable activity of just hanging out.

Not being judged was often a sublime theme when the participants talked about hanging out. Like indicated by previous research (Matthews et al., 2000; Tani, 2015) hanging out with friends was for them an opportunity to get out from under formal adult supervision as well as creating backstage environments where they did not feel they had to adhere to normative (adult) expectations. The youth centres played a central role in creating such spaces and were valued in particular for their unpretentious atmosphere and flat organisation. I26 had visited various youth centres and made specific observations regarding the staff’s approach. She appreciated how the staff seemed to consciously avoid assuming an outsider’s perspective in their interactions with young visitors and their activities. She also appreciated the time and opportunity given to young people just to socialise in their own way (doing everything from water fights to, gaming, or playing cards).

”[T]hey understand young people, and that’s good. I rather have staff that understand youths, can relate to youths, than staff that want to keep themselves to the outside the of the youth [as a group], and that I think we have […] I liked hanging out there because there were lots of youths – we could- really, anyone could hang out with everyone, and it wouldn’t feel weird. Noone was like, mean to another. It felt like for once you could actually feel good with each other and like, ’maturing’ together kind of, and have fun […] And then we got to know lots of new people that we hang out with still today and have fun with. So that I really believe in. If we as youth gather in the youth centres, we gain a different kind of connection to each other.” I26

What I26 describes in the quote can be understood an arena where normative perceptions of respectability are less present both between staff and visitors and among the youths themselves. Reading closely her quote indicate that she could not always relax in this way. Firstly, I26 remarks on the absence of youths picking on each other. This should be read in context of the pressure conveyed in several of the interviews of always having to live up to certain standards, in school, among peers and in social media. Secondly, she talks about “maturing” together and gaining a “different kind of connection", which can be read as the kind of identity work in unstructured leisure suggested by (Caldwell & Smith, 2006), where young persons are free to try out identities, roles and ways of interacting in their own pace and their own way with less adherence to prescribed roles.

## Tactical choices in hanging out

Contrasting with the emphasis on freedom and flexibility seen in previous quotes the participants also referred to conscious choices in where and with whom they preferred to hang out. Furthermore, some participants pointed to difficulties in being accepted or knowing how to fit into the seemingly spontaneous and informal practice that could still be both exclusive and elusive.

I11, (15) describe how hang out with specific individuals was a tactical choice she made to push ahead in her education. She had previously not cared about how her friends led their lives and explained that when younger it felt more important to have many friends than constructive relationships. When she changed schools, she encountered a group of girls that she described as different to what she was used to.

”[W]hen I began in this new class I thought ’yes, but this is a chance for me to hang out with these [other] three girls who are very intelligent, very calm, very ‘unproblematic’. That was smart thinking […] I’m not in school to make friends, that’s a bonus but I’m in school to learn. I’m in school to be able to become what I want to be, and I just have to make the most of the time. So, I began hanging out with those girls, it started to go well for me in school, I began studying. Instead of going out every day I went to the library to study and to get everything done […] Then of course [last year] it became a real struggle, […] so I do regret that I hung out with the wrong people for a fucking long time cause now maybe I won’t be able to apply for the [high school] program I want.” I11

I11’s quote is particularly interesting since she does not emphasise hanging out as a social activity, quite the opposite it was (at first) thought to be a tactical move to enter into a more beneficial social context. Place remains a crucial factor in this context, as her desire to establish closer connections with these girls is intricately tied to the school environment. In this setting specific forms of cultural and social capital hold significant value manifested in her admiration of their intelligent and calm dispositions. The notion of being “unproblematic” suggest an alignment with adult, and possibly middle-class, ideals that cause young persons that fall outside the norms to be labelled as ‘problematic’. Thus, her aspiration to approach these girls can be seen as influenced by the cultural norms and social hierarchies prevalent within the school.

More to be written…

# Conclusions

Not yet written…

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