## Making the journey to school: The gendered and generational aspects of risk in constructing everyday mobility

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### Abstract

In an increasingly mobile and risk-centred world, the focus of academic attention is often on global movements of people, commodities, wages, finance and information, and on global risks such as environmental deterioration, pandemics and terrorism (Adams 1999, 2005; Urry 2000; Beck 1992). However, everyday life, with everyday mobilities and everyday risk are more often the predominant concern of the majority of citizens in the West (Tulloch and Lupton 2003). This paper is situated at this more local level, aimed at understanding a microcosm of everyday life: the corporeal mobilities of the journey to school, drawing out broader implications for a society shaped by both risk and mobility. In particular, the discussion here follows on from Jenkins’ (2006) paper on risk, parenting and young people in using socio-cultural theory to question the assumptions made about parental management of risks to their children and particularly theories of ‘paranoid parenting’ (Furedi 2001). It is argued here that it is localized everyday risk discourses, and their construction according to gender and generation, that are most significant in shaping mobility.

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### Introduction

This paper builds on Jenkins’ discussion of parental influence on children’s use of outdoor space by engaging with socio-cultural theories of risk and demonstrating their application empirically. Jenkins argued that discourses of risk are shaped by ‘intergenerational cultural explanations’. Although he found no single and universally accepted cultural stance in terms of children and risk, it is contested here that such discourses are rooted in gendered constructions of ‘good’ parenting and mainstream ideologies of childhood. The approach taken here draws from the range of socio-cultural theories of risk (Adams 1995, Douglas, 1986, 1992, Douglas and Wildavsky 1983) including contemporary interpretations of Douglas’ cultural theory (Lupton 1999, Tulloch 2000, Tulloch and Lupton 2003). These theories allow an emphasis on the social and cultural contexts of risk including notions of gender and generation. Although other contextual factors such as race and class may be significant, it is assumed here that the construction of motherhood and childhood are key factors. Other theories of risk, such as Beck’s (1992) ‘risk society’ thesis are unable to provide this context as they fundamentally question the role of both gender and generation. In particular, Beck’s theory of reflexive modernization has been criticised for its lack of discussion of how the process of individualization can challenge notions of children’s dependence on adults (Wyness 2000). Instead, children are considered only in relation to their increasingly important role in adult identity, particularly in being considered increasingly precious (Beck and Beck-Gernstein 1995). Although, this individualization of risk and the increasing value of children in modern society impacts on parental fears (Valentine 2004), there are other processes in play that are predicated on children having an active role, on the gendered roles of mothering, and on the sociocultural context.

Therefore whilst it is important to contextualize risk at different levels, it is the everyday experience of risk (Tulloch and Lupton 2003) and how it is constructed according to gender and generation, that requires a deeper understanding in determining children’s levels of independence. Of course, risk is constructed in different spaces as well as different social and cultural contexts. Much of the literature (for example, Hillman et al. 1991) is concerned with how spaces come to be considered risky, without understanding the socio-cultural contexts of the experience of risk in these spaces or how the spaces come to define notions of risk and mobility. The research that forms the basis of this paper explored the mobility and risk experiences of mothers and children in the space of the journey to school. As these experiences are mediated by spatial constructions of motherhood and childhood, this paper will firstly draw from theoretical and empirical studies of gendered and generational constructions of risky space. The argument is then developed with reference to a research study that explored mothers’ and children’s experiences of the journey to school, demonstrating the co-construction of motherhood, childhood, risk and mobility..

### Gendered and adultist constructions of risky space

Everyday meanings and identities of motherhood are bound up with notions of ‘good’ parenting, which are themselves inextricably linked to risk experience and mobility. Studies (Dowling 1999, Valentine 1997) have shown that ‘good’ mothering can be defined according to acceptable norms of risk avoidance and that this can be linked to how children travel, as mothers avoid the blame associated with a divergence from community norms, a construction of risk developed by Mary Douglas in the 1980s (Douglas 1986, Douglas and Wildavsky 1983). These mothering practices are played out in the everyday, in the ‘mundane’ negotiation of risk in determining parenting practices, including mobility practices and ‘the manipulation of space, place and people’ (Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004: 435). For example, in Dowling’s (1999) study of suburban car use, it was the mothers who drove their children to school were considered to be ‘good’, whereas in other local cultures driving children to school is considered ‘bad’. In the UK, children’s increasing dependence on the car and their reduced physical activity are considered to be having a deleterious impact on their health (Biddle et al. 1998; Mackett et al. 2005; Department of Health 2004; NICE 2006). Indeed it has been found that the mobilities of the school journey could have a significant impact on children’s *hypomobility[[1]](#footnote-1)* as ‘walking to and from school for a week is much better than a week’s worth of PE and games lessons for many children’ (Mackett et al. 2005, 217). According to dominant notions of parenting, ‘good’ parenting must therefore account for children’s physical health in making mobility decisions. Everyday risk is thus constructed and experienced through mobility, a dynamic process where ‘experts’ are created and recreated in time and space and risk negotiated and renegotiated. There is a complex web of factors, including emotional and familial, at play in determining children’s access to public space (O’Brien et al. 2000).

The decreasing mobility independence of children is often associated with parents’, and particularly mothers’, ‘irrational’ approach to risk by ‘cotton-wooling’ (Jenkins 2006) their children as part of a culture of risk avoidance. However, critical analysis of this culture of ‘paranoid parenting’ (Furedi 2001), underplays the subtle and complex interaction of conceptualizations and practices of motherhood, childhood, risk and mobility on an everyday level (Jackson and Scott 1999, Pain 2003). Such discussion, although aimed at the culture of parenting rather than parents themselves, underestimates parents’ and children’s resistance to expert and media discourses of risky space. In addition, the subtle distinction between ‘paranoid parenting’ and ‘paranoid parent’ (Furedi 2008: 15) can become blurred and thereby act to reinforce mainstream parenting discourses. Furedi (2002) and Valentine (2004)’s argument that the stranger-danger discourse has created a landscape of risk around children thereby restricting their freedom, underestimates mothers’ and children’s agency in determining their risk outlooks (James et al. 1998, Kelley at al. 1997, Miller 2005). This complex interaction between motherhood and risk includes the consideration of not only mothers’ perceptions of risk, but their everyday risk experience, which is bound up with their personal biography and spatiality (Tulloch 1999, 2000, Tulloch and Lupton 2003). Using empirical evidence, Tulloch (1999, 2000) argues that women’s risk aversion is based not on irrational perceptions but on their experiences of risk and their expertise in processing this experience, and that charges of ‘irrationality’ with ‘mistaken impressions’ of ‘objective risk’ are based on ‘decontextualized’ and ‘expert driven’ research (Tulloch, 2000: 186).

Despite this, and in line with Furedi (2008), expert and media construction of risk are important in contextualizing mothers’ and children’s biographical experiences. Space is constructed as risky to both women and children through discourses that construct public space as a site of danger, particularly from strangers. Media interpretations of risk can be highly influential in constructing public space as risky to particular social groups (Valentine 2004, Weaver, Carter and Stanko 2000, Tulloch 2000). In parallel, is a related tendency to underplay other risks in the environment such as those associated with prioritisation of motorized vehicles in streets that may once have been play spaces. For example, whilst measures to control paedophiles in the community are often covered in the popular press, traffic accidents occurring on a daily basis receive less attention.

However, too often crime statistics have been used uncritically to illustrate a paradox in risky public/private space[[2]](#footnote-2), again failing to recognize the importance of the complexity and fluidity of both mothers and children’s risk landscapes based on their everyday experience (see Tulloch 1999). Mothers’ lifecourse experiences of space are thus transferred to the space of the school journey through their own relationship with this space and through their children. Mothers’ risk experience is bound up in both their experience of childhood through their own children, and their own experience of risk in space (Maguire and Shirlow 2004).

These adultist[[3]](#footnote-3) constructions of childhood are influential in shaping children’s mobility. At the same time, children are experiencing space first hand and are themselves constructing it as risky as childhood itself becomes defined by risk (see Kelley et al. 1997, Jackson and Scott 1999). Childhood is a key and rather neglected generational stage of risk construction, when critical elements of risk landscapes are developed (Jackson and Scott 1999). Children’s agency[[4]](#footnote-4) in determining their own risk needs to be viewed in the context of wider constructions of childhood and parenting. Variations in risk outlook are shaped within the dominant notions of ‘risky’ and ‘at risk’ childhoods, with children constructed ‘as little devils in one breath and little angels in the next’ (Jackson and Scott 1999, p. 95). Theories of everyday risk such as Tulloch and Lupton’s (2003) concern the daily risk experiences of children as opposed to larger scale risks such as terrorist threats or global climate change and therefore can facilitate a child-centred rather than adult-centred approach to risk exploration. They are risks that are within the realms of daily lives even if they are not experienced on a daily basis. Road accidents are therefore considered to be a daily concern even if they are not directly experienced.

An important aspect of the everyday, which is developed here from social studies of childhood (James et al. 1998, Holloway and Valentine 2000), is that children experience and develop their own everyday risk landscapes. Indeed, existing studies, concerned primarily with the context of the family, have recognized that children determine their own attitudes to risk and spatial boundaries (Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004, Kelley et al. 1997, Jackson and Scott 1999, Sibley 1995). In particular, these studies have shown that children have indicated ‘some scepticism about parental constructions of life at home as essentially safe and harmonious’ (Kelley et al. 1997: 310). Risk taking is negotiated and renegotiated within the family context with children developing their own boundaries rather than having them imposed by adults.

Indeed, often children demonstrate a strong sense of vulnerability and awareness of everyday local dangers (Valentine 1997b); with parental rules sometimes exposing them to greater risks (Pain 2001). For instance, children who are set strict time limits, which differ from their friends may be forced to travel home alone in order to arrive at the time set by their parents. In the process of following parental rules, children adopt the cultural practices of parents in their mobile practices, even if this conflicts with their own risk outlook. However, parental rules are often negotiable and open to resistance, giving children the opportunity to exercise agency in risk taking.

It is accepted, therefore, that children are deeply influenced by parental risk experience ( Kelley et al. 1997, Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004), however, children’s risk landscapes are based on their own lived experience in social and physical space as well as the experience of their parents (particularly their mothers) and the translation of this perception of risk to them. Children’s risk landscapes can therefore encompass a sense of empowerment and potential for autonomy. Thus children’s risk experience is determined by both their own embodied and social interaction with space and through adopting the risk experiences of their parents and, as more often mothers tend to be more risk averse, of their risk avoiding mothers. Studies based primarily on everyday spaces of the home and school have created knowledge on familial contexts of these processes (for example Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004, Kelley et al. 1997). However, a study of less regulated spaces can build on this knowledge in understanding the complexity and fluidity of the factors that define everyday risk landscapes of both parents and children in a range of public and private spaces. The journey to school represents such a context, an in-between space outside the familial constraints of the home and the institutional constraints of school. As well as providing an opportunity for physical exercise that can contribute to a healthier lifestyle for children (Biddle et al. 1998, Department of Health 2004) and enhancing the skills necessary to negotiate public space (Kegerreis 1993), it is also a space where children can develop socially and emotionally.

### Research methods

A number of studies have sought to explain children’s levels of dependence on adults during the school journey and to resolve the problems associated with this within school travel policy. Most often studies are based on large scale questionnaire surveys, and establishing a hierarchy of risk to children, (Hillman et al. 1990, McLean and Joshi 1995, Barker 2003, Pooley, Turnbull and Adams 2005), which can then be used as a checklist for policy intervention. However, adopting such a quantitative approach cannot allow full exploration of the socio-cultural constructions of risk. The qualitative methods adopted here, therefore, were based on an epistemological framework that recognises the gendering of risk regulation and children’s agency in determining mobility. The methods therefore encapsulated a narrative approach with mothers along with methods that have been shown to give young people access to the research process. Here, using mixed qualitative methods, mobile risk outlooks were analyzed within the context of everyday experiences (Tulloch and Lupton 2003).

The key elements of the research design were: self-filmed video recordings of journeys to school by children; in-depth interviews with children using film elicitation; and in-depth interviews with mothers. The role of visual methods (see Murray, forthcoming) in this research was crucial in facilitating both reflexivity (Pink 2001); and contextualization (Emmison 2004, Emmison and Smith 2000, Pink 2001) in the research process. The research was located in a city on the south coast of England. Twenty five young people from a range of social backgrounds and in different urban contexts[[5]](#footnote-5) filmed their journey to or from school, often describing their feelings and responses to mobile space as they travelled[[6]](#footnote-6). As children were given choice in relation to how they filmed, some chose not to give a commentary on their journey at this stage of the research process. Videoing was followed by film-elicitation interviews[[7]](#footnote-7), where the young people’s footage acted as a focus of discussion. The children were asked about various aspects of their journey: the chosen route; risks encountered along the way; who they travelled with; how decisions are made about how they travel; and changes they would like to make. In addition, eighteen mothers took part in narrative interviews in their homes during which they provided a narrative account of their experience of travel, including their journey to school and any critical or memorable experiences of being mobile. The young people’s films, the film-elicitation interviews, and the narrative interviews carried out with their mothers, provided an insight into: the role of personal biography in mobility decision-making; the importance of social networking and local cultures of risk; the impacts of lifestage on risk landscapes; and the inextricable links between risk and cultures of mothering. In particular, the visual analysis of the children’s footage and the interviews based on the children’s viewing of their videos produced insights into their emotional and sensory engagement with space that may not have been possible using more traditional methods (see Murray, forthcoming for a full discussion of this.)

### Gendering risk and mobility

The research findings supported the notion that, in terms of parental influence, it is mothers who are the key determinants of spatial boundaries for children through a combination of factors including being single parents, the primary carers and the more risk averse. Nearly all the mothers in the study said that their risk aversion had increased in motherhood, a finding which is in line with existing research (Tulloch and Lupton 2003, Valentine 2004). In line with Miller (2005), who argues that motherhood is based on the fundamental need to meet the bodily needs of children, mothers spoke of their children as extensions of their own bodies. As one mother, Gill said ‘You have to preserve yourself because you’re needed by them’. This often led to a re-assessment of risk and an entire reorganisation of everyday patterns of living.

We very quickly realised we couldn’t carry on living in this area. First there was the mugging. Then our door was kicked in and then some poor asylum seeker set themselves alight in the park near us. (Carol, mother)

Although it was evident that risk increased, non-linearly, through participants’ lives, nearly all of the mothers said that worrying about their children created a general climate of concern and raised their overall risk awareness, reflecting Lupton’s (1999) theory on the spiralling escalation of risk. For some mothers this increase in risk aversion was not only a reaction to the practice of parenting but to the establishment of mothering identities and adherence to established norms of mothering. Linda explained that hearing about an incident of child abduction and murder affected her more and ‘really stuck in [her] mind’ because she was pregnant at the time. This combination of factors ultimately constrained her mobility and the mobility of her children. Having children affected the risk landscapes and mobility of all the mothers. Cheryl said she was ‘quite carefree’ before having children but since: ‘I don’t go out really on my own now’.

Participants described motherhood as not only identity forming but as creating new risk landscape and mobility behaviour and choices. In line with Jenkins' (2006) study where parents expressed ‘dread’ at the prospect of physical harm to their children, Yvonne explains: ‘[children] are very precious to us and it wouldn’t be worth us making a bad decision just to please them, if they then came to harm’. A number of mothers in the research invested heavily in their children through their mobility practices in order to cope with risk. Typically, Karen’s mobility has not only changed in motherhood, but it reflects the level of personal and indeed bodily investment in her children.

I get to work at 7:30 but I don’t need to be in till 9:00 but it doesn’t matter (laughs) ‘cause I can have a cup of tea. So if I didn’t have to travel with George I’d have another hour in bed. But we’ll do this for the rest of this year. And to be honest there’s no hassle about it… (Karen, mother)

Reflecting a number of mothers’ everyday mobility Karen’s day is dictated by George’s mobility, including arriving in work an hour and a half earlier than necessary. Similarly Cheryl leaves at 7:30 in the morning to get Billy to school for 7:50 so that he can play football until 8:10 when school starts. She then drives to her eight year old daughter’s primary school, leaving her at the gate and watching her go into the playground. She said that she knows a lot of people in the school so feels it is ‘safe’ to do this. She then drives to work for 9:00. After finishing work at 1:30, she drives to Billy’s school, arriving at about 2:00 so that she gets a parking space as ‘all the buses come in and block the road otherwise’. She finally gets home at 3:45, having spent half of the time between leaving the house and returning home escorting her children to and from school. Her *hypermobility* is a product of her risk landscape, which is also determined by mobility restrictions, a co-construction of risk and mobility (Murray 2008).

The notion that children are too precious to subject to any form of risk, therefore, appears to give licence to apply restrictions even if the children are opposed to these. This is bound up in mothering cultures and in particular the culture of the ‘good’ mother. However, although mothers spoke emotionally about their children and how precious they are, this is not necessarily individualized (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Jenks 1996, Valentine 2004). These responses are set within socio-cultural contexts (Tulloch and Lupton 2003) including mothers’ experience of being mothered, and in particular either in giving children a ‘better life’ in relation to their own childhood experiences or in recreating a nostalgic[[8]](#footnote-8) view of childhood. Cultures of mothering vary according to social and spatial contexts. Some mothers felt that they needed to adhere to prevalent social norms premised on promoting independence, despite individualized emotional consequences.

It’s a fine balance because I’ve always been of the opinion that you have to give freedom and independence so that they can learn it at appropriate times and that sometimes you have to take that little risk. I always allowed him to play out with friends from about 6 or 7, go down to the green or on the street. He’d come back every hour or so and there were friends living in houses. There were times when me and a friend of mine were driving around trying to find them, panicking, heart stopping to find they’ve quite innocently gone off like I did when I was a child and gone off to some hidden passageway. And you have to say don’t do that but then other kids do it and I always wanted them to have that experience of childhood of making dens. (Gill, mother)

The relationship between risk and mobility, therefore, is highly dependent on constructions of motherhood and is thus gendered. The majority of mothers felt that they had taken on a particularly gendered role and that this had a significant impact on their risk landscapes and mobility. Risk is also generational as will be most significantly demonstrated through the differential constructions of risk between mothers and children, with children adopting a more experiential relationship. However, for both mothers and children, everyday experiences of risk are rooted in various levels of discourse, from global to local.

### Discourses of risk: dread and paranoia

As discussed, global discourses of risk are predominantly media and/or expert driven. It seems that, in line with Furedi (2002) on the one hand the media constructs a culture of fear, whilst at the same time experts claim over-parenting due to paranoia[[9]](#footnote-9). However, the empirical evidence here suggests something more complex. Although a number of mothers and children said they were influenced by incidents covered in the national media, the ‘dread’ events (Jenkins 2006), a greater number said they were not influenced. Those who were influenced attached this to getting older and to their mothering identities, for example:

…because things are more publicised. You hear more, ‘cause every time you put the radio on, the TV on, every time you pick the newspaper up. There doesn’t seem to have been as many when I was younger but I don’t know if that’s just because you are too busy to notice it. Whether when you become a mother, you become more fearful. (Gill, mother)

As expected the concept of the ‘stranger’ emerged throughout participant’s accounts of their risk experiences. However, rather than the media amplification of risk (Stanko 1985, Furedi 2001, Valentine 2004), it appeared that local discourses surrounding the notion of strangers are more significant. Cases of child abduction by strangers reported in national media have a substantial impact, especially when some details of the events, relate to the personal circumstances of a family. As Yvonne explains:

It’s Jessica and Holly[[10]](#footnote-10). Lucy is Jessica and Holly’s age. They were ten and they were round at one of their houses and off they went out and never came back again and it’s that sort of thing that makes you worry. There was that little girl called Sarah[[11]](#footnote-11) and she went missing. It was local near Pulborough. She was playing in a field and had a row with her brother or something and stormed off. So there’s that as well. (Yvonne, mother)

Even though the media may amplify some issues relating to strangers, most mothers spoke of the impact of strangers on someone they knew, being involved in investigation of cases of child abduction through their employment, or awareness of local incidents through social networks. A number of mothers had heard of local sightings of ‘strange men’ in the areas around the schools, which had made them more cautious.

The school phone if they don’t arrive but it’s too late. You had that child and it wasn’t too far away from here abducted and they didn’t phone until the afternoon and it was too late. They need to phone sooner… Yes, every time something like that happens I feel really really nervous. Around the school some white van tried to drag a child in and they got away. (Lisa, mother)

For others, incidents of abduction in the local area were seen as influential, even for mothers who tended to underplay the issue of strangers.

Actually they did walk once, her and her friend and they rang to say they’d jogged along the lane which is a country lane and on which there was a famous murder in the 1960s[[12]](#footnote-12) but they were all right. I was a bit alarmed… Hearing about events (like the murder) would make me more worried. (Christine, mother)

Of course, the notion of strangers has many meanings. For most, it is connected with risk of child abduction by paedophiles but it is also significantly about fear of certain groups including specific groups of young people. Again, it is direct experience that is most significant. Fiona (mother) is not worried about adult strangers, but about teenagers specifically. She talks about being scared of certain teenagers on the bus: ‘Someone talking to me. People being…talking. Kids mostly because…kids and youth. … There are some strange people about’. Similarly Maria (mother) has had problems with groups of teenagers while walking: ‘… just gangs of kids hanging around. It’s an era - for some reason you have to be screamed at by a 14 year old. I’m 41 and I have been intimidated by a teenager’.

For mothers, expert-driven risk discourses were also influential and included those centred on the notion of paranoid parenting. Almost all of the mothers indicated that they are aware of discourses of the ‘paranoid parent’, (Furedi 2001), indicated by responses such as: ‘Probably I'm being overprotective but…’ (Fiona, mother) and ‘Probably weird adults would worry me the most even though it’s probably the least likely but…’ (Sally, mother) ‘I do worry. But I have to stop worrying. Once they’re out the door I have to switch off’. Most mothers indicated that they operate within the discourse on parental paranoia and this adds another dimension to their risk landscape. Hence, paradoxically, *accusations* of paranoia become part of a mobility decision-making equation as mothers are forced into a double bind in terms of being both protective but also less ‘irrational’. Like many mothers, Yvonne weighs up risks of being paranoid against avoiding disaster and decides, in line with Jenkins (2006) that the consequences of disaster are too difficult to contemplate.

They’re more likely to have a car accident than be taken away by a horrible person but it’s the horrible person taking them away that makes you more scared. Although it’s probably very very unlikely to ever happen but it's such a dreadful thing that it becomes very important in your lives. (Yvonne, mother)

For most mothers, therefore, it is the emotional investment in their children that overrides the risk of being considered paranoid. It is evident that this is not only a product of wider ideologies but also of local discourses of risk, which includes differential attitudes to risk within the home. Mothers made it clear that they were more influenced by discourses constructed around everyday experts (Giddens 1994, Tulloch 1999). They felt that this type of expert provides information and advice that was more specific to their situation, and therefore more reliable. Institutional experts such as teachers and health professionals became overshadowed by non-traditional experts, such as their friends, colleagues and family members, particularly those they consider to be in a position that is more connected to the risk. Maria, for example, referred to her sister who is a nurse and provides her with up to date information on specific risks: ‘She was working for child health and they had statistics and they had this figure giving where people had been placed…potential offenders’. Interestingly, this use of a health professional as a legitimate form of information was one of the few references to health by mothers. Only one mother discussed health in relation to physical activity, saying that she considered walking to school to be ‘more healthy’ than using the car. Expert discourses around healthy lifestyles, therefore, did not emerge as a significant factor in mobility decision-making. Importantly, such discourses do not seem to be part of local discourses, which are important to mothers in gathering information about risks, especially those associated with strangers.

It’s useful to talk to other mums, especially Emily’s friends’ mums about how they feel about safety. Sometimes I’ll exchange with Sonia’s mum and say ‘they’re going out to town is that OK’. She’s very easy going. I mean, she’s got an older daughter so she knows what kind of things are done at what age. I wouldn’t like to allow Emily loads loads more freedom than her peers or loads loads less. So it’s nice to keep in touch with what other people are doing… (Christine, mother)

This indicates that mothers are part of the establishment of local cultures of acceptable risk (Douglas 1986) and this includes both criticizing and regulating other mothers if they feel they take too many risks and seeking acceptable levels of risk taking. One of the mothers, Beth, readily accepted Molly’s friend’s mother saying that she was ‘more worried about the traffic than someone snatching them’ and this enabled her to give Molly more independence. There remains, however, a level of individualization in relation to experts. Some mothers felt that they could provide the most expert advice about their own children.

… I read a lot but it’s mostly reading people that have an understanding of children as young adults not as children as in baby children. Their potential for understanding is greater than we give them credit for. We can talk about my experiences so that he understands why I’m saying something… I’m the expert of me he’s the expert of him and they’re the expert of them. All you can do is facilitate people to be their own experts. (Kirsty, mother)

### Everyday risky experiences

Like mothers, a number of the young people were influenced by media reporting of risky events, being both frightened and equally reassured by them. As Ben says:

… there’s one when a man …Crimewatch funnily enough… and a girl was being followed and a man grabbed her and she ran across the road to the nearest adult shouting ‘mum’ and the adult assessed the situation and said OK. That keeps me reassured. When I first went to school my mum would say if this happens blah blah blah. (Ben, young person, interview)

Similarly local experiences of strangers were significant for young participants. However these were viewed in a broader frame to include both adults and young people that they did not know personally. There is some evidence of adultist discourses of the stranger with young people referring to ‘pervy people’ and ‘strange men in the park’. However, most of the young participants are more influenced by experiences of local events, either through their direct involvement, or through local discourses of risk. On the whole, in line with one of the central themes of this research (Tulloch and Lupton 2003), the young people developed notions of risks as they encountered them, as part of an everyday experience. Therefore, the risk of a road accident, for example, is experienced as a busy, noisy, fast road, which the young people equate with road accidents through other experiences, such as through the media.

As risks are experienced and constructed through the everyday, they can similarly be negotiated through everyday practices. Even though his mother, Kirsty considered bullying to be a potentially significant risk for her son, for Ben underplays it, perhaps reflecting his ability to negotiate it in the everyday. He said that he has not had major problems where he lives now, ‘just a few times when I’ve had to avoid someone’. As Ben explained in his interview:

Well, if you’ve had trouble the previous day at school you could be worried about the person…seeing the person outside school before school. Apart from that it’s a pretty safe journey.

Roads are part of everyday life for the young people in the study, whether as walkers or as car or bus passengers. There was a general consensus amongst the young people who walk to school that roads are risky spaces. As a result, they establish a level of risk for each road and proceed with varying degrees of caution on that basis. This was evident from the young people’s video footage, where on a number of occasions, the degree of risk presented by each road was used as a tool to map out the journey.

This is the road I absolutely hate…This road is scary but the other one we come to is really quite scary. You just have to wait till all the cars go (Lilly, young person, video)

For most participants, although experience of traffic accidents was part of their risk landscapes, it is most importantly the everyday interaction with roads especially where traffic moves at speed that is most significant for both children and parents. As well as risks such as bullying, road accidents and strangers, the young people also referred to a number of other everyday risks, which impact on their mobility including dog poo, uneven pavements, traffic fumes, dogs, cats, chewing gum, and drips of ‘spit’ in the railway tunnel. These everyday risks are highly spatialized as typically demonstrated by Lucy and Lewis. On their journey, they point out the location of an incident when their pet dog was involved in an ‘attack’ by a stray cat. Both felt deeply emotionally affected by this incident, a reaction gauged from their tone of voice and body language as well as description, and refused to travel along the section of road where it took place.

Well…I like going up Poo Valley. We call it that ‘cause it’s got so, much poo on it. It’s yucky. I’ve stepped in it in the past a couple of times but my brother stepped in it a few days ago. He’s more likely to step in it. So you have to scrape it off in the class or in the pavement… (Jake, young person, interview)

Overall, one of the most significant risks discussed by young people was dog poo, which represented the potential for embarrassment rather than danger, which would be a more adultist approach (due to the risk to health). This is typical of an everyday ‘mundane’ (Backett-Milburn and Harden 2004) risk that young people need to negotiate alongside others that may arise in their particular social or environmental context. They are far removed from Beck’s (1992) technological risks set out in his ‘risk society’ but are as legitimate in shaping people’s lives.

### Risk outlooks: ambiguous and ever-changing

It is clear that risk is a concept that means different things to different people in different spaces and at different times. It is by nature difficult to pinpoint and dependent on social, emotional and political cultures (Douglas 1986, Adams 1995, Tulloch and Lupton 2003). Many participants talked about risks in an ambiguous way, like they are something unknown that they were unable to explain or categorise. This was particularly the case in relation to ‘dread’ risks involving physical and especially sexual harm. Phrases such as ‘taking away’ and ‘someone who might bring harm’ were used with reference to paedophiles often whispered, especially if young people were in the vicinity. There is evidence here of the culture of blame that surrounds this and the double bind mentioned earlier (Furedi 2001, Valentine 2004), not only in the terms used but also in the manner in which they are used, often in a lowered voice.

Perhaps as result of this, the young people also often discussed their fears of strangers ambiguously: ‘get[ting] a bit scared sometimes’ and being ‘a bit nervous of the park ‘cause there might be like strange men’. These quotes come from young people who travel through the same park, but at different times. It could be that there are strangers in the park or that they encounter the same strangers; however their reactions are more likely to be a result of risky constructions of public spaces even though neither of the young people was aware of this. This is an example of shared or collective everyday risks (Tulloch and Lupton 2003). It is a risk that is experienced in response to wider discourses, both local and global (Holloway and Valentine 2000) that results in their experience of the same space in a similar way. For example, they could be related to prevailing notions of the riskiness of ‘strange men’, the ‘demonization’ of men in public space (Valentine 2004). This collectivity in risk response is apparent not only is specific spaces, but in specific spaces at particular times of the day. As Ben said of the same space that he happy to travel in during daylight, after dark, ‘you can get frightened ‘cause of course someone could jump out of the bushes’. This is also linked to feelings of some of the mothers and young people risk around ‘getting lost’, of being out of control, not belonging, of being othered, of being somewhere separate and unfamiliar. These feelings can lead to risk aversion, which is associated with particular spaces.

Like ‘strangers’, the term ‘bully’ can also be ambiguous and subjective. However, although it was used by participants to describe a significant, although lesser threat to this ‘dread’ of strangers it could nevertheless be highly significant. This is particularly so for those mothers who had experience of bullying and risks associated with bullying formed a more significant part of their risk outlook, for whom a particular risky experience had been critical. This is the case for Karen and her son George, whose mobility patterns have been determined through the risk of bullying since George started secondary school. On the second day of school, George explained, his friend got ‘drenched with water’ and some pupils threw stink bombs. His mother described the situation:

… the first day, we went down and George got the school bus from St James Street his friend gets on it a few stops later. The first day just year 7, but the second day it was the whole school and George hated it. So now we get the bus before that one. To start off with I went right to the school but gradually I got off earlier and earlier so now I get off … and walk down to my school. He really hated the school bus. (Karen, mother)

The element of both George and Karen’s risk landscape that relates to experiences of bullying is critical, and determining not only of their school mobility but also general pattern of mobility. Similarly, Beth (mother) experienced an everyday event, which changed her risk outlook.

The other day I was pushing my younger daughter on her bike and I was down at her level and there was no cars coming and suddenly a car leapt round the corner and I realised I hadn’t seen it ‘cause I’d been down low so that was a bit scary and made me realise that they don’t see those side roads (Beth, mother).

However, even when spaces are constructed as risky, this is liable to change. Participants did not have a defined scale of risk but indicated that their risk landscapes were fluid and dynamic, even changing during the research process. For example, some of the young people indicated during the videoing that they were worried about travelling alone, but afterwards in their interviews they said they had no worries. As discussed there appears to be an awareness of discourses of risk in influencing how risk landscapes are described. Sally (mother) is aware of the discourse around risk and strangers, in particular paedophiles; although she still stated that her biggest worry is ‘probably weird adults… even though it’s probably the least likely but it would still worry me the most’. There is also reference amongst mothers, to risks of a more ambiguous nature, as Liz said, a general notion of ‘letting go’. For Liz, the issue is not only risk per se, but issues of ‘good’ mothering and identity: ‘I worried mainly about the roads. Dodgy people as well. But letting go, I had a problem with it. I didn’t like it’. She is aware that letting go is incorporated into her surrounding culture of good mothering and that not adhering to this is problematic. She alludes to a tension between her own identity as a mother, based on her own experiences of bad mothering, the prevailing culture of mothering and her own ideas about good mothering. Risk and emotionality then become key elements in the construction of identities of motherhood and childhood as discussed previously (Douglas 1986, 1992, Bondi, Davidson and Smith 2005, Gillies 2006).

### Conclusion

The research established that risk landscapes are complex and influenced by socially constructed discourses of risk as well as everyday experiences. It is evident that both mothers’ and children’s risk landscapes were influenced by both global and local factors, and that the discourse of the paranoid parent (Furedi 2001) had filtered through to mothers and impacted not only on their risk landscapes, but their ability to enter into an open dialogue about them. Mothers relied more on local discourses of risk in providing them with the coping mechanisms to deal with risk, whilst contributing to risk construction and regulation through alignment with such discourses. This included experiencing and developing these coping mechanisms on an individual basis, although still within collective notions of acceptable risk. It was also apparent that there is a need to develop a greater understanding of adultist constructions of risky space and spatial boundaries, which are based on discourses of childhood as well as discourses of mothering and risk. In addition however, children demonstrate agency through the negotiation of spatial boundaries and through the establishment of their own risk outlooks that are dependent on their experience of risk in space.

Risk landscapes differed between mothers and children, reflecting the generational aspects of risk in the everyday. However, it is evident for both that risk landscapes, even when viewed as a snapshot, are complex. They can be ambiguous, inconsistent and dynamic, with shifts in outlook occurring within very short periods of time. For mothers especially, their breadth of experience along with their more established alignment with conflicting discourses of risk leads to a complexity that is impossible to unravel using quantitative methods. For children, whose risk landscapes are more experiential, the range of everyday risks that are relevant to their mobilities need to be explored in ways that are child-led, although acknowledging that any study that is not designed and carried out by children will involve adultist constructions of knowledge.

These findings have important implications for policies aimed at meeting the mobility needs of women as well as children and young people. The complexity of the relationship between mothers and their children’s risk and mobility should be acknowledged and policies that encompass the gendered nature of this relationship should be pursued. The school journey is a distinct space, in which children have experiences that are different from those in other key spaces, such as home and school. Children and young people use the space of the school journey to develop their own risk landscapes and this needs to be recognised by policy makers in working more closely with schools to facilitate the social and emotional aspects of travel.

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1. This term is used to contrast discourses based on the negative impacts of children’s increasingly sedentary lifestyle in relation to general trends in mobility, where mobility is increasing and society is said to be experiencing *hypermobility.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This paradox is based on public space being perceived as risky whilst in ‘reality’ it is the home that

more often provides the context for sexual and physical abuse and accidents.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is a term used in the social studies of childhood (James et al. 1998) to represent the adult-centred nature of processes that determine aspects of childhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is a key element of the social studies of childhood and relates to children being social actors, taking on an active rather than passive role in society. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One inner urban and one sub-urban. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In total, 18 mothers and 25 children took part in the research, 11 mothers and 15 children in the suburban area and seven mothers and 11 children in the inner urban area. Fourteen of the children were female and 12 male. All the mothers were white in terms of ethnic origin, with 25 ethnic origin white children and one ethnic origin mixed race child. One of the children was disabled. The children were between 8 and 14 year old and the majority of mothers between 40 and 44, with 4 between 25 and 39 year old. The average age of mothers at the time of giving birth to the children involved in the study was 30, comparing with a national average age of women giving birth of 29.5 (ONS 2006). In terms of family structures, in five of the households involved in the research, parents were separated with two of children living with single mothers, and four with their mother and their mother’s partner. About half of the children had older siblings and almost two thirds had younger siblings. Most of the mothers (15) were in employment or studied part time, with one mother not in employment, and two employed on a full time basis. Two of the participating households were located in areas considered to be deprived (Office for National Statistics 2004) Ten of the mothers grew up outside the research area, seven of whom lived in rural locations during their childhoods. Six of the mothers spent their childhoods in deprived areas of the research city (Office for National Statistics 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These usually took place a few days after the young people filmed their journey to enable the transference of footage onto a tape or DVD. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Nostalgia is defined here as an idealized vision of the past, in this instance, of childhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. However it is also recognised that working class parents are often criticised for under-parenting. See, for example, Kelley et al. 1997 and O’Brien et al. 2000 for a discussion of this. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is referring to the murder of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells in Soham in 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is referring to the abduction and murder of Sarah Payne in West Sussex in 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This is referring to the murder of 12 year old Keith Lyon in 1967 (BBC 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)