

The Influence of Risk Policy on Children's Independent Mobility

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Abstract

Having the freedom to explore and experiment is an integral part of growing up. This entails both deliberate and unconscious risk-taking by children. While government agencies have a role to play in helping parents, carers and children manage risk, this role is often enacted through risk avoidance strategies aimed at the worst-case scenario. This research presents one part of a PhD dissertation that examined conceptions of risk in relation to children's independent mobility (CIM). CIM is defined as the use of public space by individuals who are under 18 years and unaccompanied by adults.

The paper finds that policy transforms children into a homogenous 'at-risk' population. This at-risk identity can be used to justify policy interventions that help keep children from unsurveilled public space and promote specific development pathways that aim to ensure children become productive adults. A side effect may be that government policy contributes to parents' and carers' concerns about letting children go places on their own. Results were obtained from a multi-level government document review. Understanding how risk is produced in policy is vital because the loss of children from public space may have consequences for achieving urban sustainability. Specifically, children who are not socialised into modes of public conduct may continue the individualised, home and car-based lifestyles that have been criticised.

1.1 Introduction

Growing up is risky business. It requires the freedom to explore, experiment and make mistakes, and often the outcomes are uncertain. Children's engagement with uncertain situations is essential for the opportunities they present for learning risk management skills, risk-taking and being able to confront adverse situations. Engaging with risk can contribute to the development of personal character, self-efficacy and competence. Basically, "...overcoming challenging situations is an essential part of living a meaningful and satisfying life" (Gill, 2007b: 16).

Governments may have a role to support parents', carers' and children to manage the everyday risks that children may encounter as part of growing up, but agencies have not grappled with the complexities of the task. The current framework for risk management has been developed to deal with the responsibility of government to protect children who have a high probability of experiencing ongoing serious harm by conditions in their daily life. A review of multi-level government policy conducted as part of a PhD thesis indicates that risk avoidance strategies and interventions are broadly applied which means that all potential situations can be treated as if they are the most extreme cases of harm to children. As a result, risk management strategies mistakenly aim to protect children from all possible negative situations, events or outcomes because the underlying ideology is that "all children have the right to feel safe and to be safe all of the time"(Child Safety Commissioner, 2006a: iv). Views about risk that are skewed toward negativity are not balanced by an understanding that risk can also be a positive element in children's development

This paper examines how risk is used in policy documents in matters relevant to children's independent mobility (CIM). It focuses on the creation of a homogenous 'at-risk' identity for children. It is argued that this identity contributes to narrowly defined places that are considered appropriate for children and that these spaces are linked to their future role as future economic adults. Together, notions of identity, places and productivity converge to support policy positions about risk and children that serve to protect urban economic agendas. An unintended outcome may be the contribution of policy to parents' and carer's concerns about the dangers children may encounter in urban environments.

Ironically, while trying to achieve one agenda, policy approaches to risk and children may be undermining the sustainability of cities. If children do not develop a relationship with their urban environments, they may not feel confident to use public space and public services such as transport. To explore these issues, a brief background about risk and CIM will be presented prior to explaining the research design. This will be followed by a discussion of the results and final comments.

1.2 Background

In Anglo and European countries, children's use of public space without adult accompaniment is becoming increasingly unusual. Lowered levels of CIM have gained attention amongst academics and professionals from fields as diverse as education, environment, geography, health, planning, psychology and transport. Researchers have sought to improve the knowledge base due to their concerns about childhood obesity, declining participation rates in informal outdoor activities and low levels of children's active school travel. They have conducted

studies on children's mobility levels, the causes of the decline in their mobility, and the implications for children's development (Blakely, 1994; Carver, Timperio, & Crawford, 2008; Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990; Kytta, 2004; Lee & Rowe, 1994; Prezza, Alparone, Cristallo, & Luigi, 2005; Valentine, 2004). One of the common elements that has emerged from these studies, is the issue of parents' concern about potential adverse situations or 'risks' that children may encounter if they go out alone.

Parents' concerns about children's safety have some basis in reality because events such as traffic accidents and assault do occur, but they do not happen to all children all of the time. Current approaches to risk management however, tend to suggest that it is appropriate to manage any possible risk as if it will happen. Tim Gill, author of *No Fear – Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society* believes that there may be an inappropriate application of workplace safety style regulations to children's development. Safety regulations are designed to prevent worst-case scenarios as if all children are potential victims, rather than focusing on children's skills development to assess and manage risk (Gill, 2007a). When accidents, injury or abuse happens, they are analysed within a management framework that identifies causes, responsibilities and preventative action that are then promoted. In this framework, causes are often attributed to children's lack of awareness; blame is attached to a lack of surveillance by parents or carers; and interventions are aimed at preventing similar situations from occurring in future.

Through promoting and normalising risk averse attitudes, beliefs in children's competence and parental and carer discretion can be significantly undermined (Furedi, 2008; Gill, 2007b). In *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May be Best for Your Child* (2008), Frank Furedi asserts that government policy

actively erodes parents' and carers' confidence and authority. Eroding factors comprise a number of elements. These include the complexification of parenting, a view that parents are ignorant and require educating, and a proliferation of advice and interventions into parents' and children's lives. He posits that "[u]fortunately, projects that aim to transform incompetent adults into skilled parents tend to disempower mothers and fathers and empower professionals" (Furedi, 2008: 171). Social, cultural and regulatory trends of risk management exacerbate parental and carer anxiety about children going out alone and encourage normative behaviours that prevent children's encounters with risk. The themes highlighted by Gill and Furedi were based on research in the UK, so this paper explores these themes in an Australian context.

1.3 Research Design

A mixed-method analysis of multi-level government and quasi-government documents provided the evidence for examining how risk averse trends in policy may be contributing to decreased levels of CIM. It is based on a chapter within a larger PhD thesis (forthcoming). The material included 234 public documents that are currently in use including: Legislation, frameworks, policies, strategies and guidelines from urban planning, transport, health promotion, environment, education, community development, community safety and corporate management. Hereafter, *policy* refers to all types of documents reviewed. Originally, the review concentrated on documents from local government, but it was found that few documents directly referred to children. There were even fewer references to children's mobility in public space. The analysis was subsequently expanded.

A combination of content, discourse and social-constructivist analysis was undertaken in relation to children's identities, competencies, behaviours and places, as well as those related to risk. A list of key words and target concepts were developed to analyse the material (Table 1). While the analysis was primarily qualitative, quantifiable data was obtained to emphasise and support the qualitative results. The words were quantified by indicating whether the document referred to specific concepts using 'yes' or 'no'. The parameters of the analysis were based on existing academic literature about CIM. Krippendorff's 'Content Analysis' (2004) was used as a guide for both analyses.

Insert Table 1 here

The number of texts analysed meant that a purely qualitative approach could result in errors when specifying dominant themes. The aim of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was to help reduce researcher bias by ensuring there was some 'objective' data to help measure the strength of assertions that could be made with regard to the material. Quantification also helped to address criticisms that qualitative analyses of policies are unsystematic (Jacobs, 2006) by facilitating a valid, reliable method that could be replicated. With regard to the qualitative methods, Krippendorff (2004: 41, italics in original) notes that "*[c]ontent analysis is context sensitive and therefore allows the researcher to process as data texts that are significant, meaningful, informative, and even representational to others*" - an activity that quantitative approaches do not permit.

1.4 Results

This section presents the qualitative results of the data analysis. It explores three themes. The first concerns the production of an at-risk identity for

children. The second concentrates on the use of this identity to define appropriate spaces for children. The third looks at how the at-risk identity and children's spaces relate to government agendas to ensure children become future productive adults.

1.4.1 At-risk identity of children

Policy concerning children has often been developed to protect those who are most likely to experience situations that are considered harmful to children's development and are believed to be preventable. These children are labelled at-risk within policy. This label is used represent their living conditions and their vulnerability to external influences. While the label may provide a shorthand description of a target population for policy, it acts to homogenise children's experiences by disregarding children's individuality. Viewing all children as children as potentially and equally vulnerable supports government and adult mediation of their activities. It also enables the expansion of formal risk management structures to protect children from incursion from family members, those who work with children and from themselves.

At the international level, the United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Framework recognise both the vulnerability of children as well as their competencies (International Secretariat for Child Friendly Cities, 2004b; United Nations, 1989). This is rarely replicated in Australian, state or local policies. Policy producers concentrate on issues of protection rather than exploration and adventure. Founded on the assumption of vulnerability, a number of policies and programmes that define children's care in family and institutional environments have been developed. Legislation such

as Victoria's Status of Children Act 1974 Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 and Children's Services Act 1996 regulate such things as parenting, childcare, family services and children's relationship to legal processes.

Policies addressing children's issues are often aimed at addressing the damage caused or that may be caused to children rather than their ability to cope with or manage their situations. An extensive list of conditions or 'risk-factors' that contribute to damage has developed over time. Socio-economic status, ethnic differences, domestic violence, ill-intentioned strangers, ill-intentioned or unskilled workers in care of children, bullying, poor parenting, poor nutrition, poor education, and poor socialisation are deemed to be potential hazards to children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004; Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference, 2005; Department of Human Services, 2001, 2006; Department of Human Services & Department of Education and Training, 2003; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2001). If children experience any of the risk-factors identified in government policy, then children are at-risk of injury, falling behind at school, making poor decisions, and engaging in risky behaviour such as drugs or alcohol. To mitigate possible adverse outcomes, service interventions are offered. For example:

The aim of [School Focused Youth Service] is to develop an integrated service response for young people who are at risk of developing behaviours that may make them vulnerable to self harm, disengagement from school, family or community or who are displaying behaviours which require support and intervention (Department of Human Services & Department of Education and Training, 2003: 6).

Interventions to address at-risk children frequently take the form of education programs. These include mother and children's groups, school support, youth services and other child-focused services (Brimbank City Council, 2004c, 2007b;

Department for Victorian Communities, 2005; Department of Human Services & Department of Education and Training, 2005). Their aim is to provide expert guidance on child rearing, how children can positively engage with life situations, or how children can 'catch-up' to children who are more advanced. While these programmes are developed with a specific target group in mind, their catchment can be extended. In doing so, policy producers imply that children who are not at extreme risk, are still at some risk, so they too can benefit from improvement. For example, the Victorian Premier's Children's Advisory Committee states that:

Research suggests that all children will benefit from high quality developmental programs before attending school. For vulnerable and disadvantaged children, access to more than one year may prove particularly beneficial (2004: 29).

Children are situated as passive recipients of programs. This tends to negate notions of children's agency and in particular, their resilience. Resilience is acknowledged to be an important aspect of children's wellbeing and their ability to overcome difficult situations. In The State of Victoria's Children's 2006 Report, it is noted that "Child wellbeing implies resilience, social confidence, secure cultural identity and protection from prolonged isolation, emotional trauma or exclusion" (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2006: 11). However, in this and other policies, resilience is often framed as a skill disseminated by government intervention rather than an intrinsic quality of children (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006; Office for Youth - Future Directions Policy, 2007; State Government of Victoria, 2005; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2006; Waters, et al., 2001). For example, in a document about improving child protection services, it is a stated aim to "...build the capacity and resilience of vulnerable children and

young people (from birth to 18 years) and their families” (The Allen Consulting Group, 2008: 70).

There are tensions with the emphasis on adult surveillance because professionals who work with children and the service providers who support at-risk children are also viewed as being potential dangers to children. The Commonwealth’s Working with Children Act 2005 and supporting policies increases attention on harm mitigation in adult-child relationships. The purpose of these policies is about protecting children-at risk, but preventing children from being at-risk from those who are suppose to protect them. Within these documents, risks are identified and expectations are established between governing organisations and between organisations and the people they service. Supporting guidelines also ensure that parents know how to select appropriate organisations for their children (Child Safety Commissioner, 2006a, 2006b). These policies facilitate an expansion from protection of children from the most difficult situations to include protection of children from any organisation and their staff. This is illustrated by the following statement from a parent who was quoted in *A guide for creating a child safe organisation*:

After I raised concerns about their procedures, I was told by my child’s dancing school that they did not feel it necessary to develop a Child Safety Policy. Now my child attends a child and family friendly dancing school (Child Safety Commissioner, 2006a: 8).

1.4.2 Children’s places

Corrosion of positive beliefs about children’s independence and agency extends into the public arena. The development of safeguards in institutional spaces implies that public spaces are uncontrolled and dangerous for children (Gill, 2007b). To ensure children are protected from hazards or being hazardous,

institutional and adult mediated spaces are encouraged. In both counts, at-risk labels contribute to child-adult divides

The Child Friendly Cities Framework (International Secretariat for Child Friendly Cities, 2004a: 1) states that children have right to “participate in family, community and social life, walk safely in the streets on their own, meet friends and play”. Support for children’s independent use of urban space has yet to be matched by policy at lower levels of government. A number of urban design, planning and community development strategies indirectly support CIM by trying to increase a sense of safety in public space, but they lack direct engagement with children’s relationships with their urban environments (Brimbank City Council, 2006a, 2006b; Department of Infrastructure, 2002, 2004; Department of Planning and Community Development, 2008b; Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2004; National Heart Foundation of Australia (Victoria Division), 2004; Roads Corporation, 2004; Scott, et al., 1997; State Government of Victoria, 2006; VicRoads, 2008). By overlooking children’s competencies, needs and experiences in urban spaces, or how these may be different to adults allows restrictive views on CIM to dominate. Combined with safety concerns, areas such as streets, alleyways and riverbanks where a child may have traditionally chosen to explore or play are now viewed as hazards to be managed or avoided. For example, in a situation brought before a local council, parents raised their concerns that children no longer played in a resurfaced residential street. In response, the local government officer stated that it is “not considered appropriate that children should be playing on roads” (Brimbank City Council, 2007a).

There are indications that appropriate children’s places are bounded by adult supervision. Traditionally, children’s places have been associated with parks and

schools, with the former offering free play opportunities. Over time, there has been an increased emphasis on institutionalised programs such as pre-school, school, after-school care, youth hubs and formalised sports and games to ensure that children are safe (Brimbank City Council, 2004a, 2007b; Brimbank City Council & Brimbank Family and Community Services Agencies, 2006; Department of Human Services & Department of Education and Training, 2005; Department of Planning and Community Development, 2008a; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001). The need to provide safe places and the need for parents and carers to have children in safe places converge in formalised places and activities. Legislation, underwrites the responsibility of parents and carers to engage with the culture of adult supervision. Under section 494 of the Australian Commonwealth's Children Youth and Families Act 2005:

- (1) A person who has the control or charge of a child must not leave the child without making reasonable provision for the child's supervision and care for a time which is unreasonable having regard to all the circumstances of the case.

The intent of this legislation is to protect children from systematic neglect, but the net could be widened to include matters concerning general supervision of children¹ in public space due to changing cultural expectations.

Children's use of unbounded and unmediated spaces are also discouraged due to the risk of older children behaving in unacceptable ways in public (National Crime Prevention Unit, 1999; Village Well, 2006; White, 1998). Policies specifically addressing issues of young people in public space are primarily concerned with decreasing the impacts of youth culture on other members of the public or increasing understanding and tolerance of youth culture (Brimbank City Council, 2004b, 2007b; Brimbank City Council & Melbourne University Private, 2006; National Crime Prevention Unit, 1999; White, 1998). Community safety

policies that address behaviours such as swearing, drugs and graffiti help to create an image that older children need surveillance. The identity of being at-risk of inappropriate behaviour facilitates the regulation of children in public space. For example, Brimbank City Council's 'General Local Law' states "[w]here an Authorised Officer reasonably believes that a person is loitering on Council property or in a public place without a lawful excuse, the officer may direct that person to leave the area" (Brimbank City Council, 2007a: 8). In this way, children 'hanging out' can be forced to move on as their activities can be framed as contravening regulation.

Ability to economically participate can also be used to regulate children in semi-public space such as malls. The Victorian government's 'Interim guidelines for large format retail premises' notes that "[r]etail areas are major generators of activity so the quality of the public environment is important, particularly as shopping has become an increasingly popular lifestyle and leisure pursuit" (Department of Planning and Community Development, 2007: 17). To maintain the quality of the environment, young people may be excluded from semi-public spaces through surveillance. This point is illustrated by a young person who was quoted in *Hanging Out: Negotiating Young People's Use of Public Space* (National Crime Prevention Unit, 1999: 22):

To sit in the shopping centre, they've made this new rule that you have to buy something, eat or drink, and they've put a time limit on it – 15 minutes - because all the lunch people had nowhere to sit, cos the young people were sitting there. And some vandalised the tables. If you're not eating or drinking you have to go.

Control of children in public space is supported at the national level. In the Australian Government's report to the UN's Children's Committee, policy producers noted that regulations to control children in public space were required for reasons of protecting children and protecting others:

Australian Governments have noted the concern of the Committee...about local legislation allowing police to remove children and young people congregating in public areas...the Federal Government notes that Article 15(2) of the Convention permits restrictions on the right of peaceful assembly where these are imposed in conformity with the law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of, among other things, public safety and public order. The restrictions placed on children's right to associate freely and peacefully assemble are designed to ensure public safety and order, including the safety of children, as well as to prevent children from committing crimes and thereby becoming involved in the criminal justice system (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003: 30).

1.4.3 Children as future productive adults

Socialisation programs guiding children into becoming successful economic adults harness the at-risk identity of children and further entrench notions of appropriate places for children (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006; Premier's Children's Advisory Committee, 2004; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001). Education is the conduit through which socialisation and economic objectives are achieved. At national and state levels, policies that align children's potential with productivity are explicit. For example, the *Australia 2020 Initial Summit Report* (2008: 6) states, "we'll know that we're on the right track when productivity is maximised by... Children's development being at the heart of the productivity agenda". Socialisation and future productivity are also brought together through community development and education policy. In *Growing Victoria Together*

(Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2001: 8) it is claimed that “education is the key to our children’s future and Victoria’s prosperity”.

Although children’s potential is not defined in government policy, a number of critical points when their potential may be impacted or at-risk are identified. These include life stages such as ante-natal care, post-natal care, pre-school, school age, high school and entry into the workforce (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006; Department of Human Services & Department of Education and Training, 2005; Education Victoria, 1998; Premier’s Children’s Advisory Committee, 2004; Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001; State Government of Victoria, 2004, 2005, 2008). Interventions are aimed at avoiding uncertainty of children’s success by trying to control possible negative outcomes. The ‘Blueprint for early childhood and school reform’ illustrates this connection. “The middle years of development (8–16 years) are a critical educational and developmental period, playing a major role in determining whether children will achieve their full potential” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008: 3). Professional mediation of children’s lives is validated by a belief that governments can produce achievable outcomes. Underlying these structures is an ideological view that “every Australian should be in a position to believe that every child has the same capacity and talent to lead a fulfilling life” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009: 141). Policy discourse subsumes differences between children based on the at-risk label and externalizes conditions for success. This means that ‘risk-factors’ such as low socio-economic status, culture, family break-up, domestic violence, etc, are amenable to government intervention. The variance amongst children and their families in terms of values, ambitions, personalities, competencies, interests and talents are either ignored or targeting by behaviour change programs.

Non-participation in government intervention programmes infers that parents and children are making risky decisions about children's futures. This includes adult participation in parenting programmes (Department of Human Services & Department of Education and Training, 2005) and programs aimed at helping children make the transition to school, and from formalised education to job training (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006; Premier's Children's Advisory Committee, 2004; Prime Minister's Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, 2001). Discussions about parent and child acceptance of at-risk labels, the relationship between culture, personal values or decision-making with regard to designated risk-factors, the acceptability of interventions, and the desire to participate in interventions are absent from the discourse.

1.5 Discussion

McDonald (2007: 2) notes that "policies are, amongst other things, discursive practices which, in their development and in their applications and operations, promote particular subject identities". Policies that define children as incompetent can justify interventions aimed at preventing or ameliorating potential damage. They also help to define the roles of adults as supervisors and participants in children's development interventions. Through labelling professionals and parents, like children, can be identified as competent or irresponsible, and they can choose to appropriate these labels through specific behaviours (White & Haines, 2001). These behaviours are those promoted through expert advice.

Expert advice about risk management concerning children is positioned as providing better outcomes than personal, parental and worker discretion, as well as a better approach compared to life experience. According to policy logic, children who participate in formalised programmes will succeed, and those who do not, will fail. In the context of children's development, children, parents and professionals are expected to engage with, internalise and comply with policy and government interventions. They are expected to do so for reasons of protecting children from harm, as well as protecting government agendas. Non-compliance with socially, culturally and legislatively accepted actions can initiate stigma and blame (Douglas, 1992). As such, risk management functions as a mechanism for social and economic control (Dean, 1994; Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983).

These processes extend to children's presence in public space and are likely to influence parents views about letting their children go out alone. Unsurveilled places are implicitly and explicitly situated as sites of risk. Potentially undesirable and uncontrollable situations are believed to be beyond the capabilities of children, and children are positioned as passive recipients of adverse impacts. Policies clearly define institutional and other adult mediated activities as appropriate places for children. In contrast to open public spaces, formal settings assure parents and carers that these sites are safe due to formal structures governing adult-child relationships. They also assure parents and carers that they are making good decisions about children's development.

Independent use of public space by children is a transgression of social, behavioural and policy norms (Iveson, 2006). It confronts policy objectives because through its enactment, the dominance of expert advice over lived experience can be contested. Independence suggests that children are

knowledgeable, skillful, and resilient, and not in need of intervention. To permit the notion that children are autonomous agents would require an evaluation of the extent of protective models currently in place. It would also require an acceptance that children can actively engage with their situations. Furthermore, parents, carers and those working directly with children, would need to be seen as competent adults who can exercise discretion with regard to child-rearing and child minding (Furedi, 2008). Personal agency exposes government organisations to potential liability and policy objectives to uncertainty. However, it is a mistake to believe that government intervention is the only insurance policy for creating successful adults, and it does not guarantee allegiance to productivity agendas.

1.6 Conclusion

The short-sighted focus on protecting all children from all unforeseen dangers in their private, social, educational and urban environments does not adequately address issues of risk in relation to children's development or CIM. Risk is attributed to children and their need of protection in their formal and informal environments, but it also be attributed to the decisions made by parents, carers, policy producers and institutions who are responsible for children's development and CIM. Viewing "Risk [as] a situation or event in which something of human value (including humans themselves) has been put at stake and where the outcome is uncertain" (Jaeger, Renn, Rosa, & Webler, 2001: 17 emphasis and parentheses in original) helps to illustrate this point. Parents and carers are putting children's development at stake to protect them from harm while policy producers are putting children's development, parents' and carers' discretion and sustainability agendas at stake. Meanwhile there is a misunderstanding

that intervention and normalised risk aversion strategies will achieve certainty for children's development and economic agendas.

Heavy control over children in public space guides them from developing cognitive, emotional, social and physical skills through direct experience with the world. It also steers children away from socialisation into a culture characterised by active participation in the public realm. In effect, children's lack of freedom in public space may undermine parents', carers' and policy producers' aims to nurture resilient competent adults and to achieve broader agendas of sustainability. The tradeoffs between the potential costs and benefits of CIM or a lack of CIM for children and for society have not been adequately evaluated or debated. A rethinking of risk and CIM, and the contribution of policy discourse to the current phenomena is required.

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ⁱ A parent in the United States of America was forced to do community service to avoid a criminal record because she was charged with neglect and child abuse for dropping her children off at the mall.