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Introduction: children at risk?

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The three papers which follow explore some of the geographies of risk in childhood. From baby-snatching and sudden infant death syndrome, through paedophilia, internet porn and mobile phone theft, to curfews and surveillance of children in public space, concern about dangers to children and children as a danger to others are becoming increasingly embedded in the consciousness and cultures of Western societies.

Discourses of children 'at risk' are various and contradictory. The statistically much rarer threats to children's safety which make headlines in the West, most notably abduction and murder by strangers, tend to overshadow a malaise of more common risks such as abuse and neglect within the family, educational underachievement, the detention of young asylum seekers, poverty and social exclusion.

Critical social science perspectives which interrogate these 'at risk' conceptualisations of children and childhood are expanding (e.g. Anderson *et al*, 1994; Panter-Brick and Smith, 2000; Roberts *et al*, 1995; Scott *et al*, 1998). Geographers have made important contributions to these debates, highlighting some of the spatialities of risk for children (e.g. Aitken, 2001; Tucker and Matthews, 2001; Valentine, 1996;

Valentine and Holloway, 2001). The papers here all contribute to these spatial perspectives. Sarah Maguire and Pete Shirlow examine perceptions of children's safety in rural Northern Ireland. Catherine Panter-Brick reviews the evidence on health risks for children living on the streets around the world. My paper with Peter Francis reports on locations of victimization, offending and fear for homeless young people in a British city. Each paper examines discourses and empirical evidence about children supposedly 'at risk' in different contexts. Some important questions are raised about the nature of risk in childhood, and the contradiction between the common labelling of children and their everyday experiences of risk. Each also points to the spatialities of risk, and the relevance of these to the responses of individuals, the state or voluntary agencies.

Like childhood itself, the categorization 'at risk' is constructed and experienced very differently in different places. And in many cases, constructions of childhood inform assumptions about risk and vice versa. For Panter-Brick, 'street children' have been defined by physical location (the street) and their lack of strong ties to the private sphere. *Because* they are not living in a home setting, they receive much public attention which centres on an assumption of risk. Panter-Brick argues that the category 'homelessness', and street children's categorisation as 'at risk', are both unhelpful, as they obscure poverty, the real enemy to children's health and welfare. In Maguire and Shirlow's study, rural Northern Ireland provides a contradictory setting for parents' fear of crime, as on the one hand, it is seen as a quiet, safe and more protective environment for children than urban areas or mainland Britain, but on the other it has been the recent setting for ethnosectarian violence. Children here, like children everywhere, receive contradictory messages about safety, but these are

rooted in the specific nature of local social space. Pain and Francis show how children who are ‘out of place’ in British society, particularly ‘excluded’ groups of older boys, quickly become viewed as a risk to others, whatever their own histories or current experiences of victimization. The parallel presumption that younger children and young women are more at risk themselves once homeless is based on misguided ideas about home as safe. Most of the experiences of violence reported involved those with a duty of protection towards children, especially family members and the police.

Discourses of ‘children at risk’ are always spatialized, then, and especially important for these authors are constructions of home. Common images of street children, and interventions to help them, may have negative implications for their health and safety once children are removed from the streets. For Panter-Brick, wide assumptions about where children are ‘at risk’ ignore the contextualisation of risk in local places. She argues that ‘at risk’ is a global discourse which sets global characteristics for street children. While there is a tendency to compare the health and welfare of children in developing countries with ‘Western middle class children, the “gold standard” of childhood’, street children are actually healthier than other groups of poor local children. Stranger danger is another prevalent spatial discourse, where fear of child abuse, like sexual violence, is spatialized and distanced from the family and the familiar. In Maguire and Shirlow’s work, strangers were often equated with those from opposite ethnosectarian groups – as Ahmed (2000) has argued, the stranger is in fact known and recognisable before any encounter, and children learn to read places and people in this particular light. Many mothers’ fears focused on their children’s safety outdoors, and yet several gave accounts of child abuse from well known and respected men in the community. Most were vague in their warnings to children; in

close-knit communities with strong Christian values, protecting the integrity of the family seems to have priority over child protection.

All such global discourses – whether worldwide, or singular discourses applied closer to home - obscure important differences between children at lesser scales. Within countries, cities, neighbourhoods and homes, there are deep social divides determining dangerous environments and which children are most at risk. Class, nationality, ethnicity, gender and age are all fundamental in structuring these risks, as each paper draws out, and children are often multiply positioned. Pain and Francis argue that this challenges the ‘either/or’ distinction which often structures understanding of offenders and victims, feared and fearful, and safe and dangerous spaces. For the homeless young people in our study, there were often no clear distinctions between being ‘a risk’ and being ‘at risk’ - victims are at times offenders, and the ‘feared’ in this case may be more fearful still. Highlighting children’s resilience and ability to survive living on the streets and move on, on the other hand, has been central to Panter-Brick’s work. While the state, voluntary agencies and much academic research has tended to construct the homeless purely as victims, the young people in Pain and Francis’ study resisted the categorization of ‘victim’, and as previous work (e.g. Ruddick 1996) has shown, space is often used in these struggles against labelling with certain identities. Risk itself may be viewed quite differently by children and outside agencies, sometimes as exciting and positively sought out.

All of these alternative perspectives on children at risk were accessed through more sensitive qualitative and participatory methodologies with children and young people. As the papers show, placing children as experts is also important in questioning levels

of risk to which they are exposed. Many risks are hidden, certainly from official statistics, academics and parents. Policy attention is often therefore inadequate; for example services for victims of crime tend to be orientated to adults' needs and patterns of adult victimization. This short collection signals, then, not only a need to move beyond 'at risk' categorizations of children, and to explore further the importance of space, place and difference in this analysis, but to find ways to look further than representations and discourses of risk and highlight the material problems which are important to children themselves.

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