



# STRANGER DANGER

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## CHILD PROTECTION AND PARENTAL FEARS IN THE RISK SOCIETY

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### INTRODUCTION

THE TRAGIC CASE of Jamie Bulger, the murder of Sarah Payne and the international mystery of Madeleine McCann are three of the many shocking and disturbing accounts of child abductions experienced by the people of the United Kingdom over the past decade. In the aftermath of these incidents the issue of extra-familial child abduction was named as the greatest fear of British parents (Pain 2006). Child abduction has also been catapulted to the fore of concerns for urban communities, childcare professionals and the media, with increased vigilance and mobilisation on issues of child safety. The central question of this article is: *To what extent is the fear of 'stranger danger' socially constructed?* The sub-questions branching from this ask *what the effects of this fear, either constructivist or realist, are on the community, parents and children, respectively.* In other words, what are the obvious and realistic social problems emanating from the phenomenon of 'stranger danger'?

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THIS PAPER WILL first establish the normative concept of the term 'stranger danger' in relation to the aforementioned cases. Society's attempt to understand and cope with such an unpredictable threat will subsequently be applied to Beck's risk theory (Beck 2002). World risk theory provides insight into causes of social constructivism, while the place of children and child protection within the world risk society is explored. Empirical data present a realistic synopsis of 'stranger danger'. Through analysing these data, answers to the central question will be attempted regarding the *extent* to which the problem is socially constructed, as deeming a problem as wholly constructivist or wholly realistic is an ontological debacle (Bröer 2007) outside the remit of this paper. The following sections will then deal with the sub-questions based on Craddock's theory that 'risk thinking' actually poses further risks (Craddock 2004: 327). This raises the issue of how the concept of 'stranger danger' generates more problems for society than just the fear of child abduction. Inter-community trust appears to be lacking, making space for a culture of suspicion and heightened risk assessment, leading to further social problems. The isolation and vulnerability faced by parents in the modern urban community will be discussed. Finally, the child-centred perspective is taken into account, as the danger of strangers impedes a child's life in many ways, particularly regarding their place in the community, personal development, health and, moreover, in the freedom of outdoor play.

### *What is 'Stranger Danger'?*

'STRANGER DANGER' COULD be described as a buzzword developed over the past decade in education and the media. Though the exact origins of the term are unclear, it generally refers to the possible threat of strangers to children, and has been incorporated into many of the 'stay safe' programmes taught by schools and urban youth clubs. According to Pain (2006), 'stranger danger' is a key concept in the education of children on their personal safety in today's society. She explains that for adults the 'stranger' is often symbolic rather than real, as the contrast to the purity and innocence of the child. It can be viewed as the modern embodiment of the 'wicked witch' or 'bogeyman.'

REALISTICALLY, THE FEAR of the 'stranger' is the fear of the abduction or abuse

of a child by someone outside the child's family. Perhaps the 'stranger' or 'strangers' are entirely unknown to the family or community or maybe mere acquaintances, which would not usually have direct contact with the children in question. Tragically, this fear of the stranger became a reality for the mother of two-year-old Jamie Bugler who was abducted and murdered by youths in a Liverpool shopping centre in 1993; and by the parents of eight year old Sarah Payne who was lured to her death by a previously convicted sex offender in 2000; and more recently, by the McCann family with the unresolved case of their daughter Madeleine, kidnapped from a Portuguese holiday home in May 2007. These cases, among many others, echoed both the national and international scene; with heartbreak, shock, confusion and anger personified in the media, affirming the damaging potential that 'strangers' wield in society.

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## The stranger is the modern embodiment of the 'wicked witch' or 'bogeyman'

CHILD ABDUCTION OR abuse by strangers was cited as the main fear of British parents today by Pain, with reference to Furedi, Tucker and Valentine (Pain 2006). Following Sarah Payne's tragic death, her parents spear-headed a campaign requesting the introduction of a law allowing restricted access to information on the whereabouts of previously convicted paedophiles within the public domain. The aim of *Sarah's Law* is to make these 'dangerous strangers' known and traceable within Britain, reducing the incidence of repeat offences. The website dedicated to the campaign (<http://www.forsarah.com>) cites that 82% of the British public support the introduction of *Sarah's Law*, demonstrating the high level of concern this case has captured in the nation, as well as the urgent need to regulate and assess the community for risks to children.

## RISK THEORY

*"So the central issue in world risk society is how to feign control over the uncontrollable – in politics, law, science, technology, economy and everyday life."* (Beck 2002: 41)

THE RISK SOCIETY is an integral part of the post-modern urban society as industrialisation and development have led us thus far, and now we are standing, staring into an abyss of the unknown (Bröer 2007). The risk society is described and theorized by some of the most notable sociologists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including Giddens, Douglas, Lash and Latour, but more prominently by Beck. This age of insecurity is characterised by unnatural and human-made uncertainties of an uncontrollable nature (Beck 2002). The term ‘risk’ has the normative connotation of gambling and the possibilities of danger, but in this context it relates more to decision-making and calculating possible outcomes, which Beck eloquently entitles ‘colonising the future’ (ibid. 40).

RISK SOCIETY THEORY spans across many aspects of modern life. To explain the concept of the world risk society in a way that is more relevant to the central theme of this paper, it is useful to view how Beck illustrates its characteristics through the dimensions of *space*, *time* and *society*. Firstly, on the spatial level, the risks in this new age of modernity do not adhere to international borders, for example, the risks associated with climate change or terrorist networks are a transnational phenomenon. Secondly, in the temporal sphere, dangers have an immeasurable longevity, e.g. the after-effects of nuclear fall-out. Finally, in the realm of society, it is difficult to attribute accountability or direct blame towards anyone, as with pollution or the financial crisis.

### *Constructivism*

SOCIETY PRODUCES ITS OWN coping strategies when faced with this deep, dark abyss of the unknown, which Bröer, with reference to Beck explains:

*“ [S]ocial construction is necessary, especially because modern dangers are invisible, intangible, hard to measure, hard to predict and impossible to insure. Confronted with uncertainty, people must position modern dangers by way of imagination or cultural theories.”* (Bröer 2007: 42)

This age of modernity is also characterised by individualism and the zeitgeist of ‘living one’s own life’. Individuals make independent decisions

and create ‘do-it-yourself-biographies’ which also bear the facet of ‘risk biographies’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 22, 24). Consequently, in one’s ‘risk biography’ it is tempting, and sometimes necessary, to indulge in the social construction mentioned above. Social problems posing possible dangers and risks to individuals are made tangible and, to a degree, more predictable, through this process of constructivism. A constructivist approach can position and define social problems in popular parlance, establishing a particular problem as common (Bröer 2007).

BECK AND BECK-GERNSHEIM write that political and social alliances often form

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## Risk assessment and child protection have heightened to the point of ‘paranoid parenting’

from an attempt to cope with a perceived problem. This embodies the world risk society on a micro level, as individuals mobilize and gain comfort in numbers, analyze, predict or attempt to prevent possible risks to the safety and security of their own ‘biographies’ (ibid.). This can be observed in the mobilisation of British parents following the death of Sarah Payne, to campaign for a change in public information policies.

### *Children in the World Risk Society*

YOUNG CHILDREN, BY their nature, are unskilled in calculating risks or judging situations, therefore parents are obliged to assess and protect their children from all potential dangers (Craddock 2004). However, in the climate of the risk society, where social constructivism has taken hold, risk assessment and child protection have heightened to the point of ‘paranoid parenting,’ a phrase coined by British child psychologist Frank Furedi in his 2001 book of the same title (Furedi 2001<sup>2</sup>). He claims that fears for children’s safety now dominates family life, particularly in the UK. Pain states that “fear for children appears to epitomize the risk anxiety which dogs modern western societies” (Pain 2006: 222). Child abduction or abuse by strangers is cited as the main fear of today’s parents by Pain, with reference to Furedi, Tucker

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/apr/25/firstchapters.reviews> retrieved on 18/10/08. No page numbers were included on this website, so it will be cited as “(Furedi 2001)” from here on.

and Valentine (ibid. 223). In order to apply Beck's world risk society theory to the realm of child protection, particularly regarding child abduction by strangers, some parallels must be drawn.

THE PREDOMINANCE OF the threat of paedophiles and child abusers in the risk society is dissolving what Beck entitles the *active trust* between citizens in the modern urban society, particularly regarding foreigners ('strangers') and governments (justice and law enforcement systems) (Beck 2002: 44). Furedi also touches on this theory and names it 'the erosion of adult solidarity' relating to the low levels of trust parents have for other adults regarding child safety, breeding the culture of 'stranger danger' (Furedi 2001). Public doubt and lack of trust in the British legal and policing systems are a feature of the *For Sarah* campaign. The following sections will examine the realism, followed by the constructivism shaping these fears, brandished in the risk society.

### CHILD ABDUCTIONS: THE FACTS

AS ALREADY STATED, Pain and Furedi hold child abduction and abuse by strangers as the greatest fear of parents in the UK today (Pain 2006). However, to what extent is this fear rationalized and justified? In this section the empirical data on child abduction will be examined starting with reference to Erikson and Friendship (2002). Their article comprises data from a sample of offenders convicted of child abduction between 1993 and 1995. The results of the survey show that 82% of child abduction offences were committed by a non-familial perpetrator, 66% of which were male. The largest overall motivational factor, at 60%, was cited as sexual (including both familial and non-familial abductions), and 'maternal desire' represented 12% of the sample, all of whom were exclusively non-familial females. Erikson and Friendship point out that the sexually motivated group of prisoners also had a history of abduction, violence and/or sexual offences. Another important note in these statistics is that where an abduction offence preceded the homicide of the victim, the prisoner was convicted of the latter offence and was therefore excluded from the sample.

IN CONTRAST TO this research, Zgoba (2004) highlights that, despite the

sensationalized information circulated in the media, sex-offenders in the US have among the lowest recidivism rates of all offenders released, at approximately 11%, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Zgoba maintains that these statistics have been overlooked because policy, funding and public attention continues to make allowances for high recidivism rates. Indeed, the fact that recidivism occurs must be acknowledged, but more attention needs to be paid to the actual rates compared to the expected rates. Parents have mobilised and campaigned for the severe penalization of child abductors and molesters, ranging from community notification to life imprisonment to chemical castration.

FUREDI (2001) MAKES REFERENCE to research that was commissioned by the BBC and conducted among Scottish parents in 1998:

*“Although the incidence of child murder by a stranger in Scotland is very low and has shown no change in the past 20 years, 76 per cent of respondents thought that there had been an increase in such tragedies, while 38 per cent believed that the increase had been ‘dramatic’.”* (Furedi 2001; see note 1)

He also cites Waiton, who found that between 1988 and 1999 the number of offenders found guilty of child abduction in England and Wales dropped from 26 to 8, dispelling fears that such crimes were on the rise (Furedi 2001). Indeed this confirms a common hiatus between fear and reality of the event feared actually occurring. Of course there is a discrepancy between the threat of something harmful and the situation actually materializing. One could live their entire life fearing something while there is a very remote chance of it ever happening.

IN THE RESEARCH conducted by Pain, children and teenagers were interviewed about their experiences of and attitudes to crime and victimization in their urban neighbourhood. ‘Stranger danger’ is a central theme in these children’s education on personal safety, yet, as Pain discovered, the children spoke more about ‘paedophiles’ and other individuals who were *known* in the locality and linked to alleged assaults, than the threat posed by ‘strangers’ (Pain 2006). Sutton (2008) also had similar findings in her

participatory study with 'estate children'. These are the children who live in social housing estates. In previous decades these estates were often built with limited amenities and play areas for children, resulting in the street being the common area of play.

### *Discussion of Data*

IT IS EVIDENT from Erikson and Friendship's findings that the vast majority of child abductions are committed by non-familial perpetrators (82%). However, they do not specify that these non-familial perpetrators are 'strangers'. Family friends, neighbours and childcare professionals can be considered non-familial, but not necessarily 'strangers' either. The high recidivism rates alluded to by Erikson and Friendship are not supported with statistics, yet the disturbing fact that recidivism occurs cannot be ignored. Zgoba's data from the U.S. Department of Justice are in contrast, supporting the claim that recidivism is relatively low in sex offenders compared to other offenders. It is possible that statistics differ greatly from country to country. Waiton's research distinctly shows that incidents of child abduction decreased, albeit in the 1990s. Zgoba illuminates the misconstrued public perceptions around the issue of repeat offences and according to Furedi, public opinions on the rate of child murders in Scotland highlight similar child safety misconceptions on this side of the Atlantic.

IN MORE QUALITATIVE and child-centred settings, Sutton and Pain investigated the real fears that children experience in their community. These fears were largely associated with certain known individuals rather than unknown 'strangers.' Pain concluded her research by recommending that the safety education of children needs to be more realistic, utilizing children's existing knowledge (Pain 2006).

EVEN THOUGH THE EMPIRICAL data used in this article provide only a few pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of 'stranger danger,' an outline is beginning to form. The likelihood of child abduction by 'strangers' is statistically slim and

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**The likelihood of child abduction by 'strangers' is less feared by children than other more tangible threats**

less feared by children than other, more tangible threats. Yet the concept 'stranger danger' appears to have caught the imagination of the public in the Anglophone world.

### STRANGER DANGER: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION?

FOR CERTAIN PARENTS, the fear of child abduction is a very real and natural emotion, but the above analysis of empirical data indicates to an undeniable element of constructivism in the 'problem' of 'stranger danger.' Fear smothers the rationale of how likely the tragedy is to actually happen.

#### *Media*

THE COVERAGE OF tragic abduction cases by broadcast and print media has brought the feelings of inconsolable loss and pain to the living rooms and breakfast tables of every British household. Gill (quoted in Aitkenhead 2007) analyzes this impact on public perceptions with reference to a study of newspaper reports of child murders throughout the twentieth century. He comments that "earlier coverage had defined these crimes as isolated atrocities committed by evil individuals", but "by the 1990s these crimes were considered a result of a society in decline." This 'society in decline' can also be interpreted as a society coming to terms with the unknown: a risk society.

HILGARTNER AND BOSK's *Public Arenas Model* in social problem theory also deals with the media's role in fanning the flames of the risk society. Their hypothesis is that a social problem is a putative condition which, depending on its framing in public discourse, is defined as a 'problem.' Public arenas encourage the construction of social problems, particularly if the named issue meets certain criteria, or 'principles of selection' (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988: 70). Child abduction certainly achieves the principles of *drama* and *culture* desired by this theory, as 'the deep mythic theme' of kidnapping innocent children is touched upon (ibid.). Every case brings dramatic images, accounts and presumptions of what has happened and what it means for society. In the summer of 2007 the European media was awash with the saga of Madeleine McCann's disappearance, with 'new symbols and events' constantly renewing the drama, to maintain the 'problem' at the fore of the media (ibid.).

GILL ADDS THAT “the media’s focus has transferred on to the grief of the victims’ families, inviting readers to share the bereaved’s perspective on the crime” (quoted in Aitkinhead 2007) inevitably evoking new feelings and anxieties in the readers. He claims that this is an unhealthy streak in the public media as it encourages one to view the world through the eyes of the unlucky, resulting in irrational fears and the quest for a zero-risk society (ibid). This world view also lends itself to the social construction of problems otherwise inconsequential to daily life.

*‘Real Blaming’*

IN HOLLWAY AND Jefferson (1997) the theory of ‘real blaming’ is introduced. In this age of ‘the globalization of doubt’ they state, with reference to Douglas (1992), that

*“...because we have no means of being sure where risk and safety lie, nothing can be trusted and anxiety, therefore, potentially finds a location in any area of daily life... the desire for certainty translates into the ‘moral concern’ for ‘real blaming’; [it] can be seen as a defence against uncertainty produced and reproduced at the cultural level.”* (Hollway and Jefferson 1997: 261)

This ‘production and reproduction’ or construction, of ‘real blaming’ has manifested in many facets of society, but in the realm of child protection it could be considered the root of what can be considered a ‘witch-hunt’ for child abusers and abductors in the UK today. There is on-going pressure to legislate *Sarah’s Law*, while vigilante attacks are also on the increase, often targeting the innocent. In 2006 the assistant general of the National Association of Police Organisations had to ask the public to stop taking the law into their own hands.<sup>3</sup>

PAIN MAKES A similar point in commenting that a disproportionate fear has taken hold in contemporary lifestyles as parenting literature “only gives fleeting attention to the actual, rather than perceived victimization

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3 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/nov/17/childrenservices.crime> retrieved on 13/02/09.

of children”, pointing to an “assumed mismatch between levels of fear and levels of risk for children” (Pain 2006: 222). For her – “many fears for children are groundless, misplaced and largely culturally constructed” (ibid. 236).

FUREDI IS SEEN as the flag bearer of theory that many of the perceived risks to children today are socially constructed. *Paranoid Parenting* suggests, by the title alone, that this ‘fatalistic outlook’ in modern parenting clouds a parent’s rational judgement in making informed decisions about their child’s safety (Furedi 2001). He adds that parents feel so insecure in this era of time that “virtually anything can be turned into a potential childcare crisis”, connoting that a negative imagination is rife among the mothers and fathers of Britain today.

*Verdict: Constructivist*

THE ABOVE ARGUMENTS indicate the extent to which the issue of child abduction by strangers is socially constructed. In fact, virtually all of the sources consulted for this study maintained that the normative understanding of ‘stranger danger’ is yet another largely constructed fear within society, inflated and relayed through the media. There appears to be little empirical evidence and academic writing to counter this hypothesis. This does not claim, however, that the whole theme of ‘stranger danger’ is free of genuinely negative effects on society. It can be observed that further social problems are generated from the initial fear of child abductions. These problems, or side-effects, are perhaps more damaging within society, in the role of parenting and in the lives of the children, themselves, as discussed in the next section.

### THE EFFECTS OF ‘STRANGER DANGER’

*“The ultimate irony of all this may be that one can now seriously entertain the question, What risk does risk thinking pose?” (Craddock 2004: 327)*

THE ASPIRATION TOWARDS a risk free society, though innately a genuine and well-meant pursuit, is producing some undesirable by-products, which are

slowly corroding and stifling society in various ways. Through the process of ‘purification’ the community is forced to cleanse itself of all possible risks in the name of child protection (Pain 2006). For the community, this creates a culture of discrimination: exactly what has to be cleansed? For the parent, the cleansing happens on a personal level, with every decision on their child’s welfare an increasing weight on their shoulders. How, then, does this rigorous cleansing and purification impact the day-to-day life of the child?

### *Effects on Community*

THE RESULTS OF a survey carried out by *Families for Freedom* in 1998 showed 76% of parents are very worried about their children’s safety in relation to ‘other people’, i.e. strangers, according to Furedi (2001). He attributes this to the ‘erosion of adult solidarity’ within the urban community. This enhances the atmosphere of fear and suspicion between the protective parent and the ‘other person,’ who is already anxious that his or her actions may be misinterpreted as inappropriate or abusive. Furedi even goes to the extent of claiming that some parents view other adults as ‘potentially predatory on their young ones’.

THIS IS SUPPORTED by Craddock’s argument that the childcare worker’s view of the world has also been distorted by constant risk-assessment as “everything and everyone is a potential suspect in the hunt for child abuse” (Craddock 2004: 324). Gill’s story of Abigail Rae gives a prime, yet tragic, example of the unintended consequences of risk avoidance:

*“Abigail Rae was a toddler who wandered out of her nursery, and drowned in a nearby pond. A male passerby told her inquest he had spotted her in the street, and been concerned. But he hadn’t saved her life by stepping in, he said, for fear of looking like he was abducting her.”* (Gill as quoted in Aitkenhead 2007)

ANOTHER ASPECT TO the damaging effects of ‘stranger danger’ in the

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community is the social construction of 'blameable scapegoats' or 'folk devils' which, according to Hollway and Jefferson, act as "the dishonest, inhumane, disorderly criminal *Other* to society's truthful, humane, orderly *self*" (Hollway and Jefferson 1997: 260). This directly relates to the 'real blaming' theory previously discussed.

SINCE THE CAMPAIGN to make convicted paedophiles known within the community (*Sarah's Law*) started in the UK, various onslaughts and attacks on the homes of alleged paedophiles have descended into 'minor riots.' Basically, 'stranger danger' has deepened cleavages in an already fragmented society through the erosion of trust in other adults. This has resulted in the withdrawal of 'other people' from interaction with children, kerbing the child's socialization within the community (Furedi 2001) and in the most extreme case, costing the life of a toddler, as Gill disclosed.

#### *Paranoid Parents*

IF 'STRANGER DANGER' is to be considered a social problem, in either the realistic or constructivist sense, it has the greatest impact on parents. Craddock aptly describes the role of the modern parent as a 'risk-assessing calculative machine' (Craddock 2004). It appears to be somewhat of a 'vicious circle,' with parents influencing the media and that, in turn, shocking greater numbers of parents. It eventually snowballs to the point where it is unthinkable that children should be unsupervised at anytime, increasing the pressure to 'chaperone' and 'helicopter' the child's life (ibid.).

GILL ADDS THAT the judgement of others increasingly sets the parameter for parenting, as parents are swept along in the modern cultural 'philosophy of protection.' "If you allow your child a degree of responsibility or freedom these days", he claims, "you're seen as a bad parent" (quoted in Aitkenhead 2007). This is echoed by Sutton, with reference to O'Brien, as "letting children roam or play about unaccompanied is becoming a marker of neglectful or irresponsible parenting" in British society (Sutton 2008: 539).

FUREDI EXPLORES THE thought that the media are the 'messengers' for deeper issues at the heart of an individualistic society (Furedi 2001). "The fragmentation of family relations and the diminished sense of community

have inevitably helped to make parents feel insecure”. This relates to his previously discussed theory of the erosion of adult solidarity, which he believes “transforms parenting into an entirely lonely affair” in modern urban city scapes. The absence of family supports, such as grandparents, familiar neighbours, reliable friendship networks and suitable childcare are all characteristics of urban life. Lacking these traditional supports can produce the sense of vulnerability, especially among lone parents, leading to paranoid parenting (ibid.). In a more theoretical sense, Furedi’s description of parental feelings can be captured by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim in the following statement:

*“Your own life – your own failure. Consequently, social crisis phenomena... can be shifted onto the shoulders of individuals. Social problems can be directly turned into psychological dispositions: into guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neurosis.”* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 24)

THE FEELINGS AND anxieties mentioned, created by the overwhelming challenges of parenting, are often projected onto the ‘stranger’ in a constructivist manner (Hollway and Jefferson 1997: 263). Taking into account that the task of parenting in the twenty-first century appears to be a lonesome and difficult one, a light of understanding can be shed on why the threat of ‘stranger danger’ strikes a nerve with so many parents.

### *Child Centred*

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS of a child is inarguably a fundamental, immutable value in modern civilisation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a child “should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community” (The United Nations 1989: 1). In dealing with any topic related to childcare it is essential to remain child-centred and include the child’s perspectives and experiences. As play is at the core of the lives of all children, it is therefore important to examine whether ‘stranger danger’ curtails the freedom of play, as well as the emotional well-being it brings about for children. Gill nostalgically asks his readers where their favourite place of play was during childhood, with the answer being ‘out of sight of

adults' (quoted in Aitkenhead 2007). This however, is becoming an archaic pleasure now enjoyed by less young people.

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## Stranger danger constraints childrens' movements and activities in public places

REFERRING TO MANY of the texts used in this study, with particular attention to the research conducted by Pain and Sutton on British children living in urban areas, the negative impacts of the 'stranger danger' phenomenon on the lives of young people are explored.

THE PERCEIVED EPIDEMIC of child abductions has led parents to believe that their children cannot be unsupervised at any time, especially outdoors in the community (Craddock 2004). This inevitably takes its toll on the child's physical, social and creative development. Pain cites various authors who claim that "stranger danger constrains children's movements and activities in public places at great cost to their autonomy, social interaction and health" (Pain 2006: 221).

FIRSTLY, IN THE physical dimension, childhood obesity is a growing trend in the UK. Furedi refers to the *British Medical Journal*, whose research discovered that 18.7% of five-year-olds were considered 'overweight' while 7.2% were deemed obese (Furedi 2001). This research has linked the decline in children's fitness to the lessening time they spend cycling and walking on a daily basis as, in this culture of fear, parents now insist on driving them to and from school (ibid). This could be attributed to the 'SUV-clad lifestyle' (Pain 2006: 237), or the 'chaperoned' and organized schedules which 'private school children' follow as Sutton's research describes in depth (Sutton 2008: 544). These lifestyles leave little space for independent outdoor play, restricting children's participation in the community.

SECONDLY, SUTTON PROPOSES that children "want to be at the heart of their community" (Sutton 2008: 540). She quotes Opie in saying that children are "also people going about their own business within their own society" as they are learning, exploring and creating their own world within the community through play (ibid.). Furedi also believes that "displays of public responsibility teach children that certain behaviour is expected by the entire

community, and not just by their mum and dad”, as children are socialized through interacting with their neighbours, not just within the four walls of the family home (Furedi 2001). Denying children exposure to their neighbourhood is depriving them of this valuable learning experience.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE ON children’s socialization is that there has been an identified link between outdoor play and disadvantage (Sutton 2008: 540). In her research, Sutton contrasts the lives of the ‘estate children’ who enjoy the public use of space in a much freer fashion to the lifestyles of ‘private school children’ who can afford to participate in organized sporting or cultural activities off the streets and out of their local playgrounds (ibid: 546).

IT IS NOTEWORTHY that Pain presents the stereotypical ‘paranoid parents’ who entertain the risk of ‘stranger danger’ as tending to hail from white ‘middle class’ suburbs, while parents and children from other sections of society have to deal with more ‘material’ and realistic fears (Pain 2006: 237). Here an inclination towards a class bias in the phenomenon of ‘stranger danger’ can be sensed, which may be worth further investigation.

FINALLY, GILL FEELS that “there has been a wholesale loss of confidence in children’s own ability to look after themselves” (quoted in Aitkenhead 2007). Children are increasingly sheltered and ‘infantilised’ with this drive for a ‘zero-risk society’ becoming paramount to ‘self-directed learning’ and good, old fashioned ‘making mistakes’ (ibid.). He theorizes that by over-protecting children at a young age they are subsequently more vulnerable at later stages in life. Furedi shares Gill’s point, that unsupervised play provides a space for the creative energy and exploits necessary for holistic development.

*“Paranoid parenting does not only restrict children’s freedom to play. It also diminishes the creative aspect of play. There is considerable evidence that children are more creative when their parents are not around to monitor their behaviour.” (Furedi 2001)*

THIS GOES DEEPER than creative expression, as freedom from ‘helicopter

parents' also digs the foundations for risk perception throughout life. Sutton (2008) interviewed 'estate children' who had actually been confronted with dangerous situations. Her findings indicate that these children had demonstrated responsibility and managed their own safety effectively, moreover, their parents had trusted them to do so (ibid). In her conclusion she states that children can become competent at assessing risk and acting accordingly. This is echoed by Pain who found that her research participants were already employing a realistic risk assessment and were aware of situations and places that warrant avoidance (Pain 2006). These two studies would suggest that what is traditionally referred to as being 'street wise,' provides a sufficient and realistic approach to 'stranger danger,' at least in the case of older children. Otherwise, the irrational fears of the parent are being transmitted onto the child through sheltering them and hindering their autonomy and growth.

A COUNTER-MOVEMENT against paranoid parenting has been initiated in the U.S. by a *New York Sun* columnist Leonore Skenazy, motivating parents to give children the freedom they had growing up, claiming that "children, like chickens, deserve a life outside the cage. The overprotected life is stunting and stifling, not to mention boring for all concerned!" (<http://freerangekids.wordpress.com/about-2>).

## CONCLUSION

THIS ARTICLE HAS provided a wider look at the social phenomenon of 'stranger danger' with an investigation into the extent to which it is a socially constructed problem. Research has shown that the abduction of a child is a parent's greatest fear and worst nightmare in the United Kingdom. This fear has been realized by many parents in recent years, with their grief and anger emblazoned across the media, alerting the public to the evils of 'stranger danger.' In turn, these parents and other citizens, touched by such atrocities, have united for support and to structure preventative strategies in the advent of these unpredictable threats. Beck (2002) describes this as an attempt to 'colonise the future'. Beck's world risk theory provided a platform on which the concept of 'stranger danger' as a social problem could be deconstructed. This process uncovered constructivism as one of the main elements adopted by those assessing intangible risk.

THE ANALYSIS OF the empirical data took another step towards examining the extent to which the named problem is of a constructivist nature. Empirical evidence, albeit varied and sometimes inconclusive, indicated that child abduction by strangers is much less frequent than perceived by the public, according to Furedi's references. The qualitative studies of Pain and Sutton demonstrated that urban children from lower socio-economic groups, usually considered more at risk, were concerned less with the fear of the unknown than fear of the known, as were their parents. Pain, in particular, attributes this negative imagination to more affluent parents from certain neighbourhoods.

THROUGH HILGARTNER AND Bosk's *Public Arenas Model* and the 'real blaming' thesis proposed by Hollway and Jefferson, some favourable conditions for cultivating the plant of paranoia, which bears the fruit of fearing the stranger, are outlined. The conclusion of this section is that, to a large extent, the problem of 'stranger danger' is socially constructed.

THE SECOND SECTION of the paper dealt with the more concrete issues related to and emanating from the 'stranger danger' phenomenon. These problems are also arguably of a constructivist brand. They are suggested in this context through inference and the content analysis of the texts consulted for this paper. The by-products of 'stranger danger' include the disintegration of trust in the community and metaphorical 'finger-pointing,' as well as the precarious balancing act that parents must perform in protecting their children from harm without obstructing their free and active lifestyles. Children need the ability to develop and learn life skills, including risk assessment. This, in turn, shapes the child's development and contentment.

IN CONCLUSION, 'STRANGER danger', understood as the abduction of a child by an unknown person, is extremely unlikely. However, 'stranger danger' understood as largely socially constructed in the context of the risk society and an already fragmented and individualized neighbourhood, poses realistic problems for children, parents and the continued integration of contemporary urban communities.

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