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Dangerous Encounters? Peer dynamics in managing neighbourhood risk

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Background

Youth violence is currently a concern for UK policy makers, media and the general public, in relation to the widely reported 'epidemic' of violence and anti-social behaviour amongst young people. Anxiety exists around young people's vulnerability to stranger danger and somewhat conversely there is also a rising tide of fear surrounding out of control and dangerous youth (Valentine, 2004). While statistical data suggests relatively stable crime rates, there is also substantial evidence that young people, and particularly boys in poor, urban UK neighbourhoods, are at high risk of encountering crime and violence, and that some young people adopt risk strategies, like carrying knives and joining gangs, which may perpetuate the very forms of risk from which they are attempting to protect themselves. This paper discusses findings from an ESRC study which explores how young people living in a high risk London neighbourhood perceive and manage dangers.

Research Questions

The central aim of the study was to explore how young people, living in an urban neighbourhood where there are high levels of deprivation, social exclusion and youth crime, negotiate perceived risks and dangers encountered in their everyday lives. While the processes through which young people make sense of and negotiate risks are complex, and linked to a range of material and social relationships, in this paper our focus is on the ways in which peer relationships help to shape risk management. Through examining these dynamics, and the ways in which these relationships may both protect from and enhance risk, we will also consider the potential of formal and informal education settings to be sites for increasing safety. We will address the following questions:• How do everyday relationships with peers contribute to the ways in which young people negotiate risk and safety?• What are the conflicts and tensions that arise in these negotiations, and in what ways do young people manage these tensions?• What are the implications for educational programmes and interventions with young people?

Methods

The study combines ethnographic and participatory research approaches, and has involved interviews and group discussions with over one hundred young people in school and community settings, as well as interviews with professionals, including youth workers, teachers and local policy makers. The data discussed in this paper is mainly drawn from work over time with small friendship groups of young people aged 12-16 to explore in depth how they negotiate risks in the neighbourhood. We met weekly and used a variety of methods, including neighbourhood map drawing, role play, photo elicitation activities and asking the young people to help analyse extracts of anonymised data from previous interviews.

Frame

Our analysis examines young people' talk about peer relations, and the dynamics of the research groups themselves. Drawing on feminist poststructural, positioning and discourse theories (e.g. Davies and Harre 1999; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002; Moghaddam et al 2003; Butler 1993; Edley 2001; Howarth 2000), we explore how girls and boys position themselves and each other in relation to discourses relating to youth, risk and the neighbourhood. We consider their investments in 'risky' subject positions, the ways in which they police each other's positions, and the tensions and troubles that arise in these negotiations. We consider the implications for their safety. Finally, we reflect on the research group as a site for these negotiations, in order to draw out some implications for actions with young people.

Research findings

Our broad aim is to develop conceptual understanding about processes of decision-making in relation to risk, violence and safety. More specifically in this paper we will address the ways in which risk calculations and management strategies are produced within and through everyday peer relationships. We will argue that the centrality of these relationships in identity construction means that the relationships have a profound influence on how young people manage the risks they encounter in the neighbourhood. Our findings reveal ways in which these relationships can protect young people, and sometimes compound risks. We will conclude by examining the potential of schools and informal education settings in building 'safe encounters' between young people.