

Title: **Risky Bodies at Leisure: Young Women Negotiating Space and Place**

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Word Count: 8,000

## **Abstract**

This article explores constructions of risk and safety in the leisure lives of young women. Drawing upon qualitative data from two action research projects based in the north east of England, we analyse the risk narratives of two groups of young women, one white and one South Asian, in order to ground theoretical perspectives on risk. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, we address the ways in which risk emotions, risk calculations and management strategies are perceived as embodied, temporal and spatially-located, arguing that risk is also deeply embedded in social and cultural discourses around female 'respectability'. Young women share some common risk perceptions and experiences, in particular linked to male violence, many choosing to inhabit inside 'safe' spaces for leisure. What is also clear is that taking a risk can be a fun and desirable aspect of leisurely activity, 'risky' behaviour providing a way for young women to negotiate and contest dominant discourses around feminine, cultural identities.

## **Key Words:**

Embodiment, Ethnicity, Gender, Identity, Leisure, Risk, Space

## Introduction

This article argues for the need to ground theoretical work on risk through an exploration of empirical data which might test, operationalise and develop the concept of risk itself. Although there is a well-established body of knowledge within the social sciences about 'risk society', there is less material that engages with the experiences and perceptions of young people, the spatiality of risk and the ways in which they manage aspects of risk as part of everyday, urban life (Mitchell et al., 2004). Debates within both feminist and sociological theory more generally, have moved towards recognition of diversity and 'difference', paying closer attention to the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and age (Maynard, 1994; 2002) but there remains insufficient empirical research in this area. Also, perspectives on 'difference' are under developed within youth studies. Our interest in capturing commonality and difference amongst groups of young women engaged in leisure, makes a contribution to contemporary theoretical debates on leisure, space, youth studies and more broadly to 'risk theorising'.

Leisure is a key arena for risk-taking behaviour, and it is deeply gendered, both in terms of the spaces and places that young women occupy and their behaviour within such spaces. Such behaviours are also overlaid by differences of age, class, sexuality, 'race', ethnicity and culture. There is a large body of literature on women's fear of crime and perceptions of safety and danger in relation to urban spaces (Koskela and Pain 2000), and work on young people around safety and danger (Valentine et al., 1998) is expanding but less literature has approached the issue of how young individuals manage everyday risks. A major concern of the paper is with how young women 'construct' risk within their own socially embedded and culturally meaningful discourses, which contributes to debates that critique 'youth' as a homogeneous category (Massey 1998). Some recent studies of risk have suggested that young people often reject official definitions of risky behaviour in favour of constructing their own subjectivised 'risk hierarchies' (Mitchell et al., 2004), many of which contextualise risk as closely associated with spaces and places, particularly those frequented during leisure time. As Lupton (1999) has observed, risk is subjective and contextual and relates to a given socio-cultural and historical moment. Our knowledge and awareness of risk, and how we perceive and manage risk, is informative of how we live our everyday lives, our relationships with others, our relationships to our own bodies, and where we choose to live, work and engage in leisure.

This paper interrogates these ideas in relation to two groups of young women, exploring how they attribute meaning to, and experience, risk within a leisure context. Drawing upon qualitative studies of young people's accounts of risk taking and the management of risk in a middle-sized town in the North East of England, we argue that concepts of risk, safety and danger are embedded within particular spaces and places. We present the findings from two empirical studies that examine young South Asian and white women's notions of risk, safety and danger in relation to socio-cultural conceptions of risk and the gendered body, demonstrating that embodied leisure behaviour can become the focus of respectability and reputation.

## Everyday Risks

As part of the well-known thesis which sites risk as an organising principle of late modern industrial society, Beck and Giddens suggest that risk has far reaching effects on the construction of contemporary identities (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Paralleling the argument that identity is increasingly articulated through differing dispositions towards risk, contemporary risk theorists also claim that a number of traditional features of industrial society, such as class, community and family are decreasing in influence, and relationships with strangers, encountered through greater national and global flows of people and cultures, are taking on greater significance. Characteristics of this change are postulated as increased reflexivity and 'individualization' in the processes of identity formation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996), resulting in individuals experiencing greater choice and determination in the construction of the 'project of self'. Contemporary individuals are construed as being more able to build and fashion identities through self-monitoring and choice. However, some theorists, such as Furlong and Cartmel (1997) remain unconvinced by the 'disappearance' of social structures such as class and gender. Working in the area of youth studies, they critique the Giddens / Beck thesis suggesting that life chances and experiences continue to be impacted upon by an individual's location within social structures. Adjacent to sociological theories of risk, a discourse has emerged in which young people are represented as 'risky' individuals. Bunton et al. (2004, pp. 1) make the case that the contemporary perception of young people as posing a risk to others has replaced previous perceptions of young people and youth cultures as 'dangerous' or 'trouble' and this concern is associated with the contemporary governance of young individuals. 'Risky youth' is also an aspect of a general prevalent adult anxiety about young people and their personal development and well being. As a consequence, adult 'regulatory regimes' such as surveillance and curfews serve to delimit young people's movement through time and space (Valentine et al., 1998, pp. 7).

## Risk, Space and Leisure

Numerous leisure and social theorists (Critchler et al., 1995) have noted the incorporation of risk into the leisure lives of young people and the tendency for youth to occupy risky leisure spaces, for example, the street or neighbourhood. In addition, a related set of more recent debates within leisure studies has begun to draw upon the cultural and spatial 'turns' in geography (Soja, 2000) to explore and interpret the meanings of space and place. We engage with the work of the 'new' cultural geographers who suggest that 'space' is in a constant state of transition as a result of 'continuous, dialectical struggles of power and resistance among and between the diversity of landscape providers, users and mediators' (Aitchison et al., 2000, pp. 19) and is invested with historical, social and symbolic meaning for its occupants (Carter et al., 1993). This work builds upon early feminist writing which critiqued the dichotomising of public and private domains into masculine and feminine spaces (Garmarnikow et al., 1983), arguing instead that they are interconnected differently in the lives of women and men. Contributions to leisure studies from feminist geographers and leisure theorists have brought into view the spatial nature of gendered relationships, critiquing theories that view space as neutral, and arguing instead for a critical appreciation of the social production of space (Aitchison et al., 2000). Massey (1994) notably writes that spaces and places, and our perceptions of

them, are gendered in ways that vary across time and between cultures. The gendered nature of spaces and places both 'reflects and has effects back on' the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. In her later work she also notes how the control and ordering of spatiality through age by 'authorities' is linked to assumptions about identity and what constitutes a 'socially acceptable' identity, and can be seen as part of the process of defining the category of 'youth' (1998, pp. 127).

Within leisure studies, Deem's (1986) groundbreaking study of women's leisure in Milton Keynes highlighted the spatial inequity of leisure opportunities for women and men. This is linked both to women's fear of violence but also men's control over women's leisure movements and men's ideas about where women should and should not go. Deem's findings are consolidated by other early feminist work on women's leisure that drew attention to the link between, sexuality, dress and leisure behaviours (Green et al., 1990) and the importance of avoiding behaviour or dress which contravenes the limits of what has been perceived as 'respectable and womanly' behaviour in public places. Valentine (1990) points to the ways in which men use either direct or indirect behaviours to exert control over women's use of space and that different groups gain control at different times, confirming that it is the social relations within space, rather than the design of space itself that serves to exclude women. Day (1999) argues that fear in public space has been constructed from a white perspective and that minority ethnic women experience consistently higher levels of fear, including fear of sexualised and racialised violence, which although well documented, often draws less scholarly attention. The intersections of gender, race and class inflect the social shaping of fear and these interrelationships in women's identities generate different combinations of spatial experiences for women. Skeggs (1997) also observes that women's access and entry to leisure space can alter according to their social position, for example, women can exclude other women on the grounds of class, 'race', ethnicity, age and culture.

### **Expanding the Parameters of Difference**

More recently analysis has focused in on the ways in which space and gender are defined through power and how power relations are etched in spaces and places and the ways in which space is not only gendered but classed, sexualised and racialised (Skeggs, 1999; Scraton and Watson, 1998). These authors have moved away from a singular focus on spatialised inequalities towards recognition of 'difference', new lifestyles and leisure as a critical and contested space in which identities are formed, reformed and negotiated. Spatial exclusion, as our data shows, continues to be an important feature of women's leisure lives and what might be considered as 'safe space' for some, might not be for others (Aitchison et al., 2000). Pain (2001) foregrounds power relations in her analysis of fear of crime amongst different groups of women arguing that if age, race and gender are:

'...viewed as social *relations* which are based upon unequal distributions of power, they begin to explain who is most affected by fear, and where. (Pain 2001: 910-11, author's emphasis)

The data drawn upon for the purposes of this paper demonstrates both the complexity of gender, race and age as social relations and the fluidity of what constitutes 'safe space'. Turning our attention to risk in everyday, routine leisure spaces, we place

specific emphasis upon local streetscapes and the ways in which different groups of young women use or avoid neighbourhood and community space for leisure. Our interest emerges in part from an ongoing concern that women generally both anticipate and experience risk in their everyday lives and when travelling to and from, and taking part, in leisure activities and using spaces for leisure. We also analyse the ways in which localised perceptions and experiences of risk and safety permeate the local landscapes and influence young women's leisure choices.

Two key feminist approaches, which employ the concepts of 'difference' (Maynard, 1994; 2002) and 'intersectionality' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004), offer coherent theories of identity in relation to issues of 'race', ethnicity, gender and class<sup>1</sup>. 'Difference' enables us to capture, 'diversity in experience and cultural life, while, at the same time, recognising that this does not necessarily lead to divisions between groups of women' (Maynard, 2002, pp. 33). This might also include aspects of commonality in leisure experiences and lifestyles. The concept of intersectionality is useful here to explain the interplay of these categories of identity in women's leisure lives but also the ways in which women experience interlocking systems of oppression in their everyday lives. This concept is concerned with arguing against privileging one aspect of experience or identity (Brah and Phoenix, 2004) and is central to our understanding of different experiences of risk and risk management strategies.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws upon qualitative data collected from two action research projects based in adjacent districts of a large industrial town in the North of England, both financed from UK government, urban regeneration funds. The first project, Strategies for Life (SFL), was carried out in 'Townville' between 1997 and 2000 and the second, The Nisaa project, began in 'Middletown' in 2001. Townville is on the periphery, and Middletown in the centre, of an urban area with a tradition of employment in the steel and chemical industries and currently experiencing high levels of unemployment. The area has a history of social and economic deprivation, ranking high on most of the official deprivation indicators. The majority population is white but Middletown has a larger black and minority ethnic (BME) community (an estimated 19.3 per cent) than Townville, which was around 5 per cent in the 2001 census (Office for National Statistics, 2001).

SFL explored young people's (11 – 24 years) perceptions and understandings of risk and risk management strategies adopted and utilised in everyday life settings, including leisure spaces (Green et al., 2000). It was conceived as an action research project and formed part of a broader strategy on economic regeneration. Fieldwork in Townville included a quantitative school-based survey, qualitative focus groups, semi-structured interviews and photography workshops, undertaken by a combination of peer and university-based interviewers. Four separate community initiatives were developed with young people and local community development workers. In this paper, we focus upon data from ten, young white working class women's (14 - 16 years) accounts of leisure and risk<sup>2</sup>. The respondents belonged to one of two self-identified groups: the 'girl's group' who congregated at a local women's centre, or the group of young women who chose not to attend this group or the youth centre but 'hung out' on the local streets instead<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, some of their safety and risk narratives centre upon discussions about the imagined spatial and social boundary

between the groups, members of the different groups rarely commingling and being wary of one another's presence.

The second project, The Nisaa Project<sup>4</sup> is ongoing, and aims to enhance opportunities for health and well being for BME women. Merging research with community development work, it is designed to address access to health, social care and leisure services and develop community-identified initiatives. Fieldwork in 'Middletown' conducted between 2001 and 2003 includes 11 focus group discussions and 28 semi-structured interviews. This paper draws upon the personal narratives of 12 South Asian women aged between 15 and 25 years. Most interviewees were recruited through participation in the community development aspects of the project. All were born in the UK, were multi-lingual and chose to conduct the interviews in English. They all self-identified as Muslim, informing us that this was a key part of their identity although they practised aspects of their religion to varying degrees. Both groups of women live in two of the more deprived wards of the town but gaining accurate data on women's class positions is a complicated issue (Pain, 1997). Skeggs (1999) among others refers to the difficulty of assigning women to class positions through traditional indicators, made more complex through differences of caste for the South Asian women (Brah, 1996).

Mindful of the issues surrounding terminology and classification of 'racial' and ethnic categories, we use the term 'Black and Minority Ethnic' when referring to the Nisaa project itself, as the project does not exclude any individual or group of women from a minority ethnic background. Interestingly, the young women featured in this paper from the Nisaa research commonly self-identified as 'Asian' in interview and focus group settings. This reminds us not only of the flexibility and fluidity of ethnic categories and the importance of internal definitions of ethnic identity (Karlsen and Nazroo, 2002) but also that external definition is implicit in the construction of ethnic categories whether or not the individual deems the categorisation personally meaningful. For the purposes of the paper, we use the category 'South Asian' when referring to this group of women whose families originate from the Asian sub-continent (Modood et al., 1994).

### **Public Places: Risky Spaces**

The spatiality of leisure, in terms of entry to, and use of public space for leisure for different identity groups has become an expanding focus of study (Scraton and Watson, 1998; Skeggs, 1999). Space, it is argued above is gendered, sexualised, classed and racialised; and ease of access and movement through space for different groups is subject to constant negotiation and contestation, and is embedded in relations of power. Public space in Western society has long been claimed by white, heterosexual men who have dominated, controlled and excluded other groups through the exertion of an aggressive 'gaze' or the use of violence (Green et al., 1990; Lupton, 1999; Pain 2001). Other groups of people, including women have had to 'fight' to establish their own spatial positioning, with some groups having greater resources of power than others to 'enter into negotiation' (Skeggs, 1999). Walker (1998) offers interesting examples of such contestation in her portrayal of the efforts of nineteenth-century, middle class feminists who occupied public spaces in Victorian London, securing access to women's participation in public life and demonstrating the historical specificity and spatial contextualisation of risk and safety discourses. Fear

and apprehension of risk can also serve as a powerful mechanism of self – exclusion from public spaces and places (Pain, 1997; 2001). As our empirical data demonstrates risk is spatially and temporally situated and relates to the social and cultural identities of the embodied self. The sources of risk referred to by the participants include male physical, sexual and racial violence and harassment, damage to personal reputation and for the South Asian women, injury to family honour through gossip and rumour and consequent community disapproval of, and pathologisation of, the individual. The risk of public gossip about them being seen in the wrong place at the wrong time could damage both their own and their family’s reputation in the community.

Our findings make a significant contribution to understanding the processes through which space and risk are gendered, sexualised and ‘racialised’ and how such relations are key components in the construction of social space and the built environment. These findings underline Scraton and Watson’s (1998, pp. 131) observation that certain spaces can become ‘no-go’ areas on the grounds of ‘race’, whilst conversely, spaces can be perceived as safer or more welcoming when the occupants share common identities (Watt and Stenson, 1998).

### **‘Inside’ Spaces are Safe**

The town as a whole is often stigmatised as a ‘no-go’ area (Back, 1996) with certain locales and their inhabitants criminalised by local mythologies and folklore about drug-use, anti-social behaviour, prostitution and other social ‘problems’. Both groups of women reside in these ‘infamous’ areas though they are spatially distanced from each other. All of the young women perceive themselves to be at risk in public spaces from male physical violence, and deploy diverse risk management strategies. Certain areas of their neighbourhoods and the town, and specifically particular streets, being considered ‘out of bounds’ by the young women. Most of the white girls who congregated in the Townville women’s centre thought that their locality was a dangerous place to live. They generally considered ‘outside’ public space to be dangerous, but portrayed ‘inside’ private spaces as safe (Pain, 1997). These girls expressed fear and anxiety about what might happen to them in outside spaces, especially in the evenings, which they considered to be their time for leisure. They linked this fear with perceptions of ‘dangerous men’, figures characterised as ‘men out of control’. Outside space associated with the physical characteristics of darkness and enclosure featured predominately in their photographs of risky places. Poorly lit spaces, boarded up houses, alleys, a tunnel to the supermarket; parks and bushes were all perceived as hazardous spaces where the girls might be attacked (Seabrook and Green, 2004). Regardless of whether such men actually existed, as Stanko (1990) argues, fear of assault was a very real experience. The young women frequently comment upon the need to guard themselves against unidentified ‘stranger danger’ and safety, is sought in numbers as Jane explains,

‘You feel safer when you’re with someone, ‘cos you might get grabbed.’

In spite of the town’s risky ‘reputation’, none of our participants reported personal experiences of male violence to the researchers. There are numerous explanations for this, including that neither projects specifically asked for personal experiences of violent crime, that focus group settings may be inappropriate research situations to discuss experiences of crime and that there is a generally low rate of self-reportage. In

addition, our data supports the spatial paradox identified by Pain (1997) where women fear ‘outside spaces’ more than those inside, regardless of the potential for violence in the home and workplace and where reportage of fear of risk to the person is significantly higher than actual experience of it.

For the young south Asian women, the streets were not used as spaces for leisure, many preferring home or indoor community based venues as ‘safe’ spaces for leisure. Although they shared very similar perceptions of risk to the white girls, risk narratives featured in their conversations about travelling to and from venues rather than occupation of outside space. These women walked in groups or took lifts from family and friends because of the perceived danger of walking alone. This was in part because parents and family members encouraged them to stay indoors for reasons of safety and also because these women’s culture required that they protect their honour and modesty by participation in women only leisure activities and staying inside after dark. As the women in this focus group articulate, street and town based leisure, in particular in the evenings was felt to be inappropriate:

- Furzana: ‘I’m trying to think which people would be allowed out, cos like young people ...’  
Salma: ‘We’re not allowed out really late, like after seven or something or eight isn’t it.’  
Yasmin: ‘Well as soon as it gets dark we stay just indoors.’

Women often demonstrate time-space behaviours such as using main paths and avoiding night time or after dark access to avoid harm (Deem, 1996, Green et al., 1990). For these young women, being inside abates the risks of outside spaces and gives them an opportunity to enjoy themselves free from the threat of danger.

Whilst both groups of young women talk about the threat of male violence, for the South Asian women, the threat of racialised violence is an additional problem. In contrast to the white girls, they are keenly aware of the interracial tensions in their area and the risks and fears that this evokes as they move through space and negotiate other bodies within this space. As others have noted (Day, 1999) this impacts significantly on their ability to access leisure and other social spaces,

‘Especially ... that area of our alleyway there is a lot of like whites and Asians fighting and stuff. Its like the college I go to, my dad, parents don’t even like me walking there but cos it’s a really good college I go there ... my Asian friends ... they got their phones took off them and abused and stuff like that - its not very good at all.’ (Yasmin)

The risks posed to the young South Asian women in public spaces was also discussed in reference to them being framed as outsiders to the area. Women were made to feel that they did not belong in the town because they were from a ‘different’ ethnic and cultural background:

- Sadif ‘Yeah it’s a really bad area cos, they just don’t like you do they ...’  
Yasmin ‘They just can’t accept us being here ...’  
Sadif ‘It’s like ‘oh go back to your own country.’



Furzana           ‘All they say is ‘pakis get out.’’  
 Rashida           ‘This is when we go ‘this is our country.’’  
 Furzana           ‘That’s just like no, totally go away, go away, not interested.’

This group of women also describe being harassed by white individuals because they wear the *hijab* (headscarf), an example of what Modood et al. (1994) describe as cultural racism, which uses cultural difference to vilify, marginalise and exclude different groups. As the dialogue above demonstrates, the women do not readily accept outsider status, feeling that the local space is their home, that they belong in the area and displaying pride in their cultural identity. They actively resist being ‘othered’ by responding to their abusers through a mixture of silent opposition and verbal countenance. However, as Jamila illustrates, this mode of resistance has the potential to expose her to a position of heightened risk,

Jamila           ‘I don’t care how big they are or men or women or whatever I’ll start back. I’ve a really bad habit, it is bad really, but I can’t help it.’  
 Interviewer   ‘What makes it bad?’  
 Jamila           ‘It is bad because you’re starting on them aren’t you? [You should] just leave and walk away.’

The use and meanings associated with leisure spaces and concomitant risks can vary both between and within genders. Different groups of young women living within the same locality negotiate space and its occupants differently as part of their everyday leisure experience and learn to find ways of active resistance to and management of, the recurrent risks that they face on a daily basis.

### **Embodied Risk: Gender and Identity**

Narratives of embodied respectability are also central aspects of women’s occupation of space and uptake of leisure pursuits (Green et al., 1990). Women’s behaviour is regulated, monitored and judged by others, in particular by those seeking to explain male violence (Stanko, 1990), but also in relation to commonly-held assumptions made about what constitutes ‘respectable feminine’ behaviour (Mitchell et al., 2004). In our studies, the young women’s experiences of risk and movement through space and place were closely connected to the representation of them as bodies which needed to be carefully managed. The white girls groups distinguished between themselves in terms of ‘risky’ bodies. Paradoxically, for many of them, being perceived as streetwise or part of the ‘in crowd’ coincides with simultaneously being seen as ‘tarts’ or ‘slappers’ and can be related to wearing particular clothing and occupying risky spaces, especially after dark. The girls from ‘inside’ the Townville women’s centre regularly referred to ‘the other girls’, whose ‘outsider’ status was represented by their non-attendance at the Girls Group. These other girls were represented as choosing to ‘hang out’ on the street and generally represent non respectable bodies. For the centre-based girls such embodied behaviour signified that the ‘others’ were sexually available, not least through their occupation of outside space during the evening. The girls attending the group referred to themselves as good, respectable girls in contrast to ‘the others’.

Women of all ages both monitor and control their own bodies and behaviour and those of other women in public spaces (Burgess, 1998). The young South Asian women regularly cited the extended family, in particularly female members as playing a key role in regulating their leisure behaviour as young women and gossip and ostracism were mechanisms which facilitated an effective self-policing system. For some of the young women there appeared to be tension between wanting to 'go out' to socialise and exercise, alongside anxiety that being seen in public, in the wrong place at the wrong time, and perhaps in inappropriate clothing might damage their own and their family's reputations. This finding replicates those of the Sheffield based study of women's leisure conducted over fifteen years earlier (Green et al., 1990). Central to this was the notion of honour, *Izzat*, which was explained to us by the women in terms of 'family honour' and reputation, the safeguarding of which was the responsibility of the young Muslim women themselves through respectable and chaste behaviour (Gillespie, 1995) and other female members of the family. In consequence, they articulated feeling that their behaviour and actions were under the scrutiny of other community members for potential transgression of this code (Dwyer, 1998). As Jamila described to us,

“Cos ... people see you, like Asians right, whether it's a man or a woman or a young lad or a young girl they'll talk about them ... 'did you see her, did you see her walking over there, oh, what's she doing'. You get a bad reputation.’

Women 'moderated' their behaviour in public to avoid being 'gossiped about' and labelled as 'unrespectable'. Uzma enjoys going to the sauna where she could sit and chat with friends and family, and 'catch up on the gossip' but she was strongly opposed to 'malicious' gossip because it could acutely damage a woman's reputation,

‘A reputation is what somebody makes of themselves really and basically if somebody gossips about them their reputation is down the drain kinda thing... So, that's why I don't like people gossiping ... I would not like anyone gossiping about me ...’

One focus group of young women described how they deployed diverse strategies to avoid being 'spotted' by family and community members. They talked about their use of taxis to access leisure spaces, explaining that although some of their parents would not allow them to go in a taxi, they had on a few occasions done so. As one woman explained, she hoped that in the event of using a taxi, the driver would be a white male to avoid the risk of a negative association with an unrelated South Asian male. For some of the women, even having a white male driver was not enough to mitigate the risk of being seen using a taxi. This group employ the metaphor of 'ducking' to describe the act of concealing their faces and identities when travelling in a taxi. Even though some of the women had only used a taxi on a few occasions, 'ducking' was common currency in the group that they joked about in the discussion. The term encapsulates the broader social pressure from parents and the community upon these women to avoid being linked with other South Asian men outside of marriage whilst also showing evidence of women's negotiation of their own identities in relation to family and community and within different social spaces (Dwyer, 1998; Qureshi and Moores, 1999). It also demonstrates the use of 'spatial techniques' to minimise risk to their reputations.

- Yasmin 'Yeah we're not allowed in taxis, neither ... it's ... a bad thing, its something that we connect with like, ooh, so and so was in a taxi ...'
- Sadif 'Cos Middletown's such a small town, it's like everyone knows ... So it's like ... 'Oh no I saw so and so's daughter and I picked her up from here, she was going here' ... 'Oh yeah, she's wearing this and like she's doing this.'
- Furzana 'If I got a taxi I hope it's a white person, honestly I'm sitting there please be someone white ... I've only ordered a taxi twice but I've been lucky and I've got a white person ... But even if it is ... a taxi with a like Asian [driver] its like 'duck'!
- Rashida 'Yeah you have to duck [laughter]... we like had to go to like one of my friends right and ... its like we all ran to the back [seats in the taxi] and it was like, I'm not going at the front.'

The relative compactness of this town space the women refer to reduces their capacity to remain unidentified, unlike in larger cities where a degree of anonymity is afforded.

This data demonstrates their oscillatory feelings of being aware of the need to maintain a respectable reputation, which is of course all about guarding the body against harm and dishonour, and yet wanting to enjoy their leisure time as young women in ways that are not always acceptable to their families (Qureshi and Moores, 1999). Our findings confirm Martin's (1988) claim that women tend to see their bodies as separated from themselves, as alienated or fragmented and in need of control. Women carry a multiple burden of risk where risk relates to culturally situated aspects of risk intertwining with more generic risks to women. Risk is filtered through to and experienced at an everyday level from different identity positions, with leisure activities threatening to jeopardise their 'respectability', combined with the need to negotiate multi-layered aspects of risk and danger in relation to violence in public space. Risk assessments are constantly in flux for women, and show the interaction between the self / body and social space and others in that space (Pain, 2001).

### **Pleasurable Risks: 'But being on the street is more exciting'**

Risk is always a two-way concept and offers positive as well as negative values to risk takers and managers. 'Risky' behaviour and risk-taking can be a source of pleasure, excitement and enjoyment (Lupton, 1999) and leisure is one such space where risk-taking can occur. Extreme sports and adventure holidays are two examples of activities designed to thrill the participant and release the individual from the mundane and routine nature of everyday life. Such examples are however, representative of risk taking strategies within certain social groups. Less research has focussed upon the pleasures and thrills of risk taking in everyday life and localised spaces and places.

Significant differences were found in the data in relation to risk and excitement, a 'positive' aspect of risk. The white girls interviewed for SFL, who hung about the streets of Townville, experienced public street space as a key arena for acting out their daily routines and leisure experiences. In general they were more confident than the centre-based girls and did not perceive the locality as especially dangerous. They

considered 'being outside' to be an everyday learning experience, more empowering than the centre-based club environment. They 'hung out' in the evening and felt that their knowledge of spatial techniques or 'expertise' (Koskela, 1997) gained through this experience enabled them to move around more freely. This corroborates theories about women's diverse and intricate expressions of spatial confidence, and significantly, challenges overtly simplistic and one-dimensional labelling of women as 'passive' and 'fearful' (Koskela, 1997; 1999). It also affirms Pain's (2001) assertion that although most girls learn powerful messages about risk of violence and danger in public space across childhood and adolescence, some choose to resist the rules and norms.

'You learn where to go and where not to go ... people make the danger their selves.' (Karen)

Although the street girls sometimes felt unsafe on the streets, they sought to manage this through staying in groups. Being on the streets also allowed them to avoid the negative associations of 'good girl' identities.

Louise 'You follow your friends.'  
 Emma 'There's always people that will stick up for you, you got like connections all over, haven't you really. You got like all friends spread all over so everyone knows somebody else.'

Focus group work with the centre-based girls demonstrated that they viewed the street girls as not respectable and thus 'risky' mainly because they occupied outside spaces that were perceived to be dangerous, a risk discourse underpinned by historical notions of respectability and responsibility (Skeggs, 1999). Risk was thus seen to be embodied by certain groups of girls felt to be almost contagious by association and inflected with a class narrative about 'distancing' themselves from the bodies of others that 'they don't want to be' (Skeggs, 1999: 82). When asked if they thought that 'these other girls' felt safe on the streets two of the centre-based girls replied:

Vicky 'Yes they [girls on the streets] hang around with all these lads and tarts and everything.'  
 Melanie 'Well they feel safe doing what they want to do won't they.'  
 Vicky 'Well myself I wouldn't do what they do.' (Laughter)

Both the white and South Asian young women expressed concerns about the lack of safe leisure spaces 'outside' and suggested that boys monopolized those spaces that were available. As Pearce (1996) suggests, girls' access to specific spaces is limited. Girls are often found to use 'inside' spaces and this can be of detriment to their psychological and social well being. They may become excluded from developing the specific knowledges and skills needed when accessing outside spaces. All of the women in the two projects share a common concern about their leisure activities threatening to damage their reputations and provoke parental disapproval, but there are also differences in the ways in which this risk is experienced and curtailed. The street girls adopted such risk management strategies as going in the company of other girls. They did not view their drinking of alcohol to be a risk to them or to anyone else; for them it was ordinary and they justified it by creating hierarchies of risk, illustrated in the following dialogue from a focus group:

- Gemma 'We just drink, we don't smoke or take drugs, that's really bad but drink isn't all that bad. We have a good drink most of the time, it just depends how much money we can get or we raid from her dad's bureau.'
- Interviewer 'What about sex?'
- Gemma 'No never.' I want to try it but daren't ... I think I'll get pregnant or something.'
- Anna 'Yeah especially with the lads round Townville you don't know what you'd get.'
- Interviewer 'Do you attend school regularly both of you or do you truant?'
- Gemma 'No I wouldn't truant, that's too risky.'

The South Asian women did not generally speak of risk-taking and its pleasures in the same way as the girls described above, showing that young women's construction of risk and the delights to be found in risk-taking are complex and subjective. That did not mean that they never took risks, as the earlier dialogue concerning taxi use shows. However, risk was not referred to directly in terms of thrill seeking. Risk taking and perception of risk is socially and culturally nuanced, with differences between groups of women impacting upon the gendered nature of risk-taking and risk-avoidance (Lupton, 1999).

## Conclusion

This article argues for the need to ground and analyse theoretical work on risk through an exploration of empirical data about the spatiality of young women's leisure. The empirical data presented above confirms that young women carefully manage their embodied and spatialised selves to avoid everyday aspects of risk, but it also demonstrates that there are significant contextual differences within and between groups of women. It captures commonality and difference amongst ethnically diverse groups engaged in leisure, thus making a timely contribution to contemporary theoretical debates on leisure, youth studies and more broadly to 'risk theorising'. Contrary to persistent stereotyping, young women encounter, manage and take risks on a daily basis. Their constructions of time and space are based upon, not simply the structural design of spaces, but also on feelings, fears, and anxieties depending upon where they are situated in particular localities (Valentine, 1990); emotions that are embedded in local discourses and knowledge, characterised by gender, 'race' and relations of power.

In the accounts that we have presented, risk is depicted as an organizing principle of daily routines and leisure practices that dictate young women's use of time and space. Because certain times of the day and spaces are perceived as risky, their own position or place in time and space is continually under negotiation. Additionally, our data demonstrates that constructions of the 'respectable woman' are linked to women's positioning within the diverse cultures that they occupy. The paper critiques theories that position women and young people in general as 'at risk', or 'risky', rather than as 'risk takers'. Risk and risky spaces are socially located, not restricted to the city landscape and features of a dynamic identity and status negotiation that is multidimensional and fluid. The spatiality of risk alters across space and time and is highly contextual.

Drawing upon perspectives which stress the importance of gender, 'race', ethnicity, class and age as process and relational, assists us in highlighting how identity is linked to the continual and at times contradictory, re-working of individual subjectivities via a complex interaction between personal agency and social context. This contributes to an understanding of how young women can both actively construct their identities, for example, by taking risks and contesting established risk discourses, and yet continue to be constrained by dominant discourses which represent them as submissive bodies striving for respectability. The empirical data presented here supports this thesis, but also demonstrates interesting differences between young women, in terms of their management and perceptions of embodied risk. What is clear is that young women employ diverse strategies for managing most risks, whether physical or social, experienced individually, in peer groups, on the street, in leisure venues or at home. More broadly, interrogating 'risk' through a lens of 'race', gender, class, sexuality and age, helps us to unpack the subtleties of everyday life.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors espouse the widely established view that 'race' has no legitimate base in science and is socially constructed (Brah, 1996) although is often represented in everyday life as a fixed and objective category of identity (Maynard, 1994), where definitions of 'race' often employ markers or signifiers of 'race' including skin colour, country of origin, religion, nationality and language mobilised to marginalise and denigrate different social groups. Ethnicity, like 'race' signifies a process and is relational but is primarily a mechanism of 'boundary maintenance' between groups (Brah, 1996). 'Race' and ethnicity are not therefore isolated from other social categories and are continuously [re] produced and negotiated with other forms of difference in varied historical settings.

<sup>2</sup> Findings from SFL are published elsewhere in Mitchell et al. (2004) *Young People, Risk and Leisure: Constructing Identities in Everyday Life*.

<sup>3</sup> We refer to the young white women as 'girls' in specific areas of the paper since it represents the idiomatic term used by the respondents when describing themselves and their female peers.

<sup>4</sup> 'Nisaa' is derived from the Arabic word meaning 'women'.

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