

Research Traineeships proposal

1. Project title

Caught Between Autonomy and Control: A Qualitative Inquiry into how Tweens and Their Parents Negotiate Remote Supervision via Mobile Technologies

2. Coordinators

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3. Project Summary

a. Introduction & Theoretical Framework

‘Child independent mobility’ (CIM) refers to all forms of children’s movement and play in non-institutionalized public places that take place without adult supervision, such as walking to school and playing or hanging around in the neighborhood (Mikkelsen & Christensen, 2013). Between the 1970’s and the early years of the new millennium, there has been a dramatic decrease in the independent mobility of 8-12 year olds in Western societies (Buliung, Mitra & Faulkner, 2009; Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990; McDonald, 2007). Against the backdrop of contemporary risk society (cf. Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), this decrease is mostly attributed to changes in parenting practices. Compared to earlier generations, contemporary parents appear more concerned about children’s safety in public spaces (Malone, 2007; Pain, 2006). Particularly anxieties about traffic and ‘stranger danger’ have led to greater parental restrictions on children’s unsupervised outdoor movement and play (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997).

There is concern about the consequences of increasing parental restrictions on CIM, both for the individual child and society. Children who are less independently mobile, have poorer physical health (McDonald, 2007), acquire less knowledge of, and competence in navigating their environment (Risotto & Giuliani, 2006), and display lower levels of social wellbeing (Prezza, Pilloni, Morabito et al., 2001). In addition, parental anxieties about and restrictions on free exploration in public spaces may lead children to cultivate a ‘mean’ worldview in which public places and strangers should be feared rather than trusted (Furedi, 2001). Given that trust in strangers is a key component of a nation’s social capital, the cultivation of such world views may ultimately weaken the social fabric of society.

Mobile technology radically challenges the notion of children being ‘unsupervised’ when independently mobile by affording ‘remote surveillance’ of the child. Via mobile communication, parents can check up on children’s whereabouts anytime and anyplace; children can contact parents when in fear or danger (Christensen, 2009; Pain et al., 2005). Location-tracking devices and applications (e.g., Kidspotter™) further increase opportunities for remote surveillance. These technologies give real-time information on the child’s whereabouts, and offer safety features, such as an alarm when the child leaves a preset perimeter.

The desirability of these developments for CIM is debated. Whereas some scholars regard mobile technologies as emancipatory instruments that contribute to CIM by affording a ‘safe autonomy’ (e.g., Castells et al., 2007; Ribak, 2009), others regard them as instruments for fear-driven, middle class parents to exert excessive control over the whereabouts and actions of their offspring (e.g., Malone, 2007) that may ultimately damage rather than promote the wellbeing of the child and society at large (Furedi, 2001). What has largely been ignored in this debate, however, is the complex interplay between technology, human agency and a constellation of meaningful contextual factors.

b. Research Questions

The primary aim of this research project is to generate insight into this interplay by examining how tweens and their parents negotiate remote surveillance of the tween’s independent mobility (RQ1). To that end, we examine meanings and practices of remote surveillance. We devote attention to the lived experiences of children by exploring how meanings and practices vary across contexts (RQ2). Relevant contextual factors include the (local) culture in which the child lives, the structural position of the child and family (e.g., the child’s gender, age, ethnicity, and household structure), the geographical environment in which the child lives (e.g., urban/rural

area), the parenting styles parents adhere to, and the risk perceptions and fears of both caregivers and the child itself (Pain et al., 2005; Mikkelsen & Christensen, 2009; Palen & Hughes, 2007; Vanden Abeele, 2014). As mentioned above, remote surveillance may concern mobile communication, but may also concern GPS-tracking of the child. A third aim of this project is to examine similarities and differences in the ways in which mobile communication and location tracking technologies are perceived and embedded in everyday life (RQ3). We focus on the remote surveillance of 8-12 year olds. These children are referred to as ‘tweens’ because they share an identity of ‘in-betweenness’ – an ambiguous status of being neither a child, neither an adolescent (Buckingham, 2012). Hence, their social categorization is structurally and socially ‘invisible’ to other people and to society at large (Cody, Lawlor & MacLaren, 2010). Thus, a fourth aim of the current project is to explore the shared meanings and practices of 8-12 year olds, and how they give rise to the ‘tween identity’ (RQ4). We devote attention to covert processes of (anticipatory) socialization during this life stage.

c. Methodology

The research project entails two subprojects. The 1st subproject focuses on the role of mobile communication technologies as transitional objects during tweenhood. By means of an ethnographic methodology, comprising of interviews, parent-child interviews and focus group interviews, the aim is to examine how the duality between control and autonomy plays out in the context of remote surveillance of tweens’ independent mobility. We devote attention to the gendered nature of remote surveillance. De Certeau’s (1984) distinction between tactics and strategy will be used as an analytical framework to examine tweens’ tactical behavior in response to the strategies of control that caregivers and the structure of society enforces. In the interviews with (parents and) children, innovative ethnographic methods are used to ensure that tweens’ voices are heard and that dialogue and knowledge transfer are optimally realized.

In the 2nd subproject we focus on meanings assigned to the use of location tracking technologies in the tracking of children and tweens. We first focus on how meaning exists in the public sphere, in mass and online media (e.g., fora). Second, in the interviews carried out in subproject 1, we include questions with regard to parents’ and children’s preconceptions about childhood and the real and imagined dangers that children may encounter in public places, and how these preconceptions influence the meanings assigned to these technologies. In addition, in a small selection of (self-selected) families we implement a location tracking technology with which family members can track each other’s location, and examine how the families ‘domesticate’ the technology by assigning meaning to it as (1) a material artefact that offers (2) particular contents (3) in particular contexts (cf. ‘triple articulation’; Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992). This analysis reveals how technologies are objectified and incorporated into everyday routines, and how social, cultural, political and economic factors affect this process.

d. Interdisciplinary Nature & Required Collaboration between Research Trainees

The project is interdisciplinary in nature as its aim is to unveil the interplay between (local/household) culture (i.e. culture studies) and mobile communication technology (i.e. communication sciences). The dominant theoretical frameworks and methods guiding this project span across both disciplines. The research trainees applying for this research project will collaborate substantially in the framing of the studies (reading and discussing literature) and in the data collection phase (constructing the interview guide, conducting the interviews, transcribing the interviews).

4. Project timeline

a. Month 1-3:

- read assigned literatures & discuss theoretical framework with project group
- contact families (N = 20) and participants focus group interviews (via local schools)
- prepare interview guide
- *DELIVERABLE: each student develops theoretical framework*

b. Month 4-6:

- Conduct interviews with children, parents and child-parent dyads in 20 households
- Conduct focus group interview with parents and children

c. Month 7-9:

- Data preparation and analysis: transcribe and annotate materials
- Discuss results with project group in iterative fashion in order to identify themes

d. Month 10-12:

- Write a report of the studies conducted
- *DELIVERABLE: each student writes a white paper that will be shared as a working paper on the department's website and may be submitted to conferences & journals*

5. Research Trainee Profile

Both BA and (Re)MA students with an interest in this topic can apply for this project. Preferably students have affinity with qualitative methodology. Students can apply by writing a letter of motivation to the project coordinators.

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