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COUNTRY SPECIFIC CULTURAL FACTORS: A PROPOSAL FOR THE STUDY OF CHILDREN'S INDEPENDENT MOBILITY IN PORTUGAL

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Abstract

This paper aims to characterize Children's Independent Mobility (CIM) in Portugal, discussing the effect of country specific cultural aspects as constraints or promoters of that mobility. We analyzed CIM in five different territorial typologies, as part of an international study promoted by the Policy Studies Institute aimed to depict CIM in 16 countries, using the same methodology. The Portuguese study included 1099 children (8-15 years old) and their parents selected from inner city, urban, suburban, small town and rural areas. CIM was assessed by using a Portuguese version of the international Child Independent Mobility Questionnaires (Policy Studies Institute) for parents and children. Portugal occupies position number 10 in the international CIM rank. The higher trend of CIM belongs to Northern European countries. In this study, we present our main results of the Portuguese CIM study, together with the cultural factors that may influence our findings. We also propose that CIM in Portugal is low due to the effects of a pervasive motorized culture of public use of space. Hence, we reinforce the importance of studying country specific cultural factors in CIM.

Keywords: *independent mobility; children; cultural factors*

Introduction

Freedom of movement through the physical environment is crucial for children's gradual process of becoming independent and self-reliant. The process that enables children to progressively become independent and learn about the environment by means of autonomous exploration and play in their daily places and surroundings can be named "Children's Independent Mobility" (CIM). Since the 1990 seminal study published by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) (Hillman, Adams, & Whitelegg, 1990), which showed that over the previous 20 years there had been a marked reduction in CIM in England, there has been an international growing concern about the reduction of children's independent mobility. Different studies show that loss of CIM jeopardizes children's well-being and can have adverse effects on children's physical (Page, Cooper, Griew, Davis, & Hillsdon, 2009), cognitive (Rissotto & Tonucci, 2002) and social (Brown, Mackett, Gong, Kitazawa, & Paskins, 2008) development. The effect of country specific cultural aspects as constraints or promoters of CIM is seldom studied.

Due to the idea that over the last decades CIM has suffered a drastic reduction throughout westernized countries, the PSI surveys were recently repeated in England and international partners were invited to conduct equivalent surveys in their countries. CIM was analyzed in 16 countries (Bicket, 2013), in which parents and children completed questionnaires regarding whether the children were allowed to: 1) cross main roads alone; 2) travel on their

own to places other than school (within walking distance of home); 3) travel home from school alone; 4) go out alone after dark; 5) travel on local (non-school) buses alone; 6) cycle on main roads alone. These sets of rules defined by parents concerning permission for children to move around independently in their daily physical environment are known as children's mobility licences and are good indicators of the levels of CIM for each country. The international guidelines, specified that in each country the questionnaires should be completed in areas considered to be representative of five territorial typologies: inner city, urban, suburban, small town and rural. For data comparison between the countries different authors have dichotomized study areas as 'urban' (i.e., 'inner city', 'urban', 'suburban') and 'rural' (i.e. 'small town' and 'rural'). The main results of the Portuguese study and the discussion about the effects of country specific cultural aspects as constraints or promoters of CIM are presented next.

The Portuguese Study

In Portugal, 1099 child-parent dyads participated in the survey. The sample comprised: 660 primary school children (49% boys, 69% urban) (3rd to 6th grade) and 439 secondary school children (43% boys, 72% urban) (6th to 10th grade), with mean ages of 9.8 (SD=1.5) and 13.8 (SD=1.6) years, respectively.

The Portuguese main findings indicate a significant influence of the variables age and territory typologies in the levels of children's independent mobility. As children grow older they are granted more independent mobility licences (see Figure 1)

Table 1. Percentage of children who are granted the different mobility licenses according to age.

Mobility Licence	**Children granted the licenses by age group (%)**							
	8 yrs	**9 yrs**	**10yrs**	**11yrs**	**12yrs**	**13yrs**	**14yrs**	**15yrs**
Allowed to cross main roads	13.8	25.6	45.6	64.2	83.3	98.6	96.4	98.6
Allowed to go on their own to places other than school	9.3	13.8	23.9	41.7	57.9	76.3	78.8	87.0
Allowed to come home from school alone	6.1	9.1	30.2	45.5	62.6	79.1	85.7	85.5
Allowed to go out after dark	0.8	1.0	2.6	2.8	8.7	15.6	27.4	41.8

Allowed to use buses	0.8	4.0	14.0	16.4	36.1	65.0	76.1	88.8
Allowed to cycle on main roads (if cycle owner)	4.0	12.2	10.6	25.0	34.1	52.2	65.8	76.8

Regarding the influence of territory typologies, more rural than urban school children are allowed to: go to places other than school on their own (53% vs. 45%), go out after dark (17% vs. 10%) and cycle on main roads alone (43% vs 27%). More urban than rural school children are allowed to travel on local buses alone (40% vs 29%). Rural children report engaging in more independent activities during the weekend (M=2.60, SD=2.51) than urban children (M=1.83, SD=2.14) (t(541)=4.82, p<.001).

Gender does not seem to be an influent factor for the independent mobility licences in Portugal, since it only influenced the license to go on their own to other places than school, which is granted to more boys than girls. However, gender influenced the number of independent activities done during the weekend, which was greater for boys (M=2.43, SD=2.51) than for girls (M=1.74, SD=2.01) (t(965)=4.98, p<.001).

When the international results from the 16 countries were analyzed, a country ranking of CIM based on the proportion of a country's valid population holding a given licence was created (Bicket, 2013), the overall results of this ranking are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Overall ranking of CIM based on consideration of six licences of independent mobility (data from Bicket, 2013).

CIM ranking	Country
1	Finland
2	Japan
3=	Norway
3=	Germany
5	Sweden
6	Denmark
7	Israel
8=	Australia
8=	Brazil
10	Portugal
11=	Ireland
11=	England
13	France
14	South Africa
15	Italy

Where does Portugal stand? Constraints and promoters of CIM in Portugal

The results of the country specific studies show a clear distinction between the levels of CIM in northern and southern European countries (see Table 2), with the "northern snowy countries" (Finland, Norway, Germany, Sweden and Denmark) occupying the first positions in the CIM ranking and the central and "sunny southern countries" (Portugal, Ireland, England, France and Italy) occupying the last positions. As we can easily infer from these results, the climate is probably not one of the most influential factors on the levels of CIM. In fact, studies with a multivariate focus suggest that a number of key factors are associated with CIM (Shaw et al., 2013). Different studies (e.g., Alparone & Pacilli, 2012; Gebel et al., 2005; Johansson, 2006) have shown that in an ecological framework, behaviour is influenced by individual factors and by the social and physical environments.

The individual factors that have been pointed out as influential to CIM levels are divided into child factors (e.g., age, gender, maturity level) and parental factors (e.g., attitudes and beliefs about the benefits or dangers of CIM, car access, having older children). The social environment factors include the economic, cultural and political factors that affect the levels of CIM, such as the sense of community or the social danger perception. The physical environment includes the existence of a safe traffic environment, footpaths and cycle paths, and the walkability of destinations for children.

Next we present some of the factors that might have contributed to the Portuguese 10th position in the CIM ranking. First, we identify attitudes, behaviours and facts that influence CIM in our country. After that, we recognize the major constraints and promoters of CIM in Portugal.

Attitudes and customs towards walking and cycling.

According to the Statistics Portugal (2011), in 2011 there were in Portugal 447 cars per 1000 people. Our research sample included 1099 participants, where 73.8% had car ownership and 76.9% were bicycle owners. However, 59.7% of children only use their bicycles once a week.

Culturally, owning a car in Portugal, or several cars it's a sign of relevant socioeconomic status and quality of life. A lot of the urban development was thought in terms of car use and access to places. In rural areas, throughout the years, especially after the integration of Portugal in the EU, the transportation trend of people became more motorised.

Only recently there has been a concern for the use of active forms of transportation in cities and towns, though these initiatives are still very incipient. In big cities, like Lisbon and Porto,

it's becoming trendy and fashionable for young adults to use bicycles. Nonetheless, allowing for children's active and independent transportation is seen as an irresponsible behaviour mainly due to the traffic hazards and concerns. Freedom of movement and active modes of transportation, mainly for children and youths, is still culturally and socially underappreciated.

Traffic fatality rates.

According to the national road safety report of 2012 (ANSR, 2012), there were, in Portugal, in 2011, a total of 5826 pedestrians involved in road accidents, 117 of them were mortal victims, 513 had serious injuries and 5176 had light injuries. From these pedestrians, up to 14 years old of age, there were 5 mortal victims, 63 had serious injuries, 861 suffered from light injuries.

According to the national road safety report of 2012 (ANSR, 2013), there were, in Portugal, in 2012, a total of 5245 pedestrians involved in road accidents, 107 of them were mortal victims, 440 had serious injuries and 4698 had light injuries. From these pedestrians, up to 14 years old of age, there were 2 mortal victims, 58 had serious injuries, 739 suffered from light injuries.

The fatality rates for pedestrians up to 14 years old involved in road accidents don't seem to be particularly high (5 deaths in 2011 and 2 deaths in 2012). Anyway, according to our results, traffic danger is the main concern for parents when their children are out by themselves. The way parents find to overcome this concern is to chauffer their children to school increasing consequently the number of cars on the road.

Road crossing behaviours.

In Portugal, there aren't any unique road crossing behaviours. Cars must stop at zebra-crossings if pedestrians are waiting to cross the street. Nevertheless, if the zebra-crossing is not signalled by lights, pedestrians tend to cross very quickly to the opposite side of the road (very often, after crossing, they signal a thanking gesture to the car driver). It seems that pedestrians feel that they are an obstacle for the flow of cars, like if they were underprivileged in terms of use of public space.

There are other constrictions to CIM, such as: non-existence of traffic calming measures in many residential areas; neighbourhoods, including nearby home roads, are not signed as designated play and pedestrians areas, and car parking on pavements is quite frequent in Portuguese cities.

In our view, we believe that the former behaviours and constrictions are symptoms of a pervasive motorised culture in the public realm.

Parental attitudes towards supervision.

Based on our results regarding the impact of area typologies on the mobility independent licences, we infer that parental attitudes towards supervision of children's movement through the environment are context specific depending on each particular licence (e.g.: more rural than urban school children are allowed to go to places other than school on their own, go out after dark and cycle on main roads alone, but more urban than rural school children are allowed to travel on local buses alone). It seems that children's independent mobility licences depend on multifactorial variables. We believe these are set on a conjugation of parents' perception regarding the physical, social, economic and cultural features of the territory their children have to occupy, to fulfil their daily needs.

In our sample, very few children were granted the licence to go out alone after dark. Culturally, night time is foreseen as less safe, with more perils and more unpredictable. It's also a time associated with violent, disruptive, risky and irresponsible behaviours by youths and adults. Nowadays, this night time environmental qualification is reinforced by media. In this sense, parents are socially expected to severely restrict children's freedom at night time. If they are not congruent with this expectation, they fear they will be considered irresponsible, bad and negligent parents. Another reason for this kind of parental restriction on children's freedom might be the fact that, for many parents, the late afternoon and night time is the available period during the day (due to long working hours) for them to spend time with their children.

Parental restrictions on children's mobility are also driven by a series a myths. Some of them originate from abusive generalizations of certain events documented by the media, whilst others result out of common-sense misjudgements. These myths have culturally thriven in the Portuguese society and they are the following: a too dangerous environment (overestimation of traffic and social fears done by the media); lack of time (adults' organizational skills, will and availability); presence of rain (it rains only between 6-10 % of the time and mostly during night-time); too far away distances (children are one of the most mobile groups of population and on average per day they travel long distances).

Major constraints to CIM in Portugal.

The 10th place that Portugal occupies in the CIM ranking is influenced by a multitude of individual, social and physical factors that interact with each other. The result is the existence of a dominant motorised "car-friendly" culture over a yet incipient freedom of movement "child-friendly" culture. We argue this point is based on the following reasons:

• Parental view of children's autonomy is excessively focused on the learning of cognitive, in-class, skills to the detriment of the ability to develop motor (physical), social and environmental competences.

• CIM and the abilities to navigate freely in the environment are not valued as key social and cognitive acquisition for the children's life (as other cognitive skills like learning to read and count, learning another language, etc). Generally, parents, schools and local and central governments disregard or underestimate the developmental benefits of CIM.

• Walking and cycling distances between home and school are not common criteria for parents to choose their place of residence and the school for the children.

• When the former is used as criteria, many parents prefer to spend time with their children driving them around to structure organized learning or leisure time activities (most of them over walking distance). In this way, from a very early age, parents start transporting their children around using motorised vehicles. They also lose their own freedoms because they are locked into chauffeuring their children.

• Lack of outdoor free playful interaction between parents and children. The neighbourhood is not used by parents as place to play with their children. The neighbourhood, for many children, is an unknown and not welcoming place to move around. Parents use their resources to offer their children indoor and electronic play possibilities.

• The existence of strong parental concerns related with traffic (as a risk of when their children cross the road, they might be involved in a road accident- 58.4% of our study sample). At the same time, parents show some uncertainty in relation to whether most adults and young people who live in the neighbourhood look out for other people's children in the area.

• The use of motorized vehicles is still seen as a sign of socioeconomic status and of quality of life.

• Parents tend to behave within what is socially and culturally expected from them. Parents concerns about safety and about children's competence are culturally bound (Malone & Rudner, 2011). In terms of children's mobility and use of public space, it's not socially expected to grant them independence and to neither act collectively (with other parents) to fight for environmental and social changes, so that their children move around freely through the environment.

Good practices to promote CIM in Portugal.

Different municipalities in Portugal have promoted several initiatives and practices that facilitate directly and indirectly CIM. Some of those initiatives are listed below:

• Encouraging children's use of school buses. Throughout some cities and near residential areas there are specific school bus stops. Although this practice doesn't promote directly children's active commuting, it does it indirectly because children will have to walk from their homes to the bus stop (unless they are chauffeured there by their parents).

• Pedibus (walking bus). This practice is not very common but it is starting to appear in some school districts. It promotes children's active travel mode in the home-school trajectory. In cooperation with some schools, young children lead by an adult walk to and from school.

• The renewal of cycling lanes throughout some cities (e.g., Lisbon) and availability of a cycling map (cycling trails and bicycle parking places).

• Programmes that intend car traffic reduction and increase of bicycle use and public transportation.

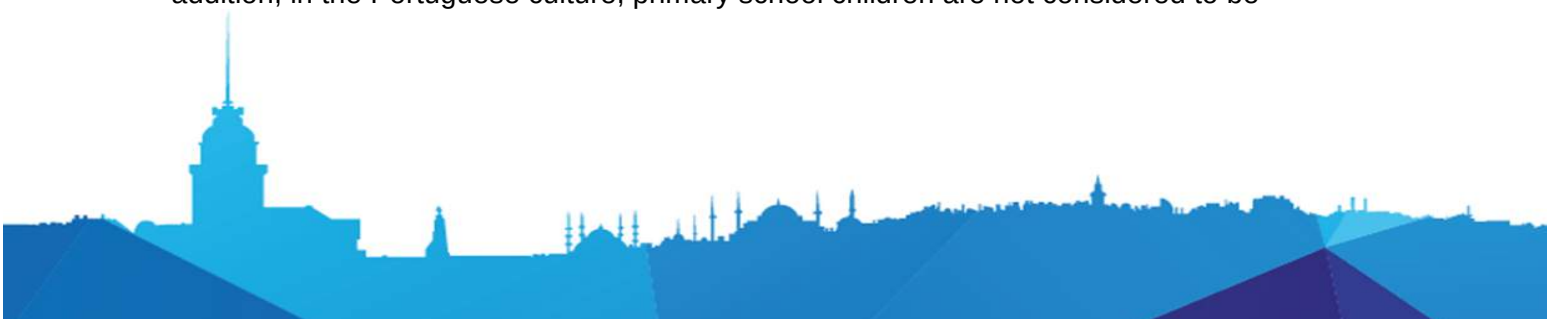
• Conduction of mobility studies focused on user needs, international and national good practices and market availability of equipment and materials.

Despite these efforts, we believe that the most important policy change that is necessary in Portugal is to listen locally to children's views and perceptions about their experiences in the physical environment and include them as active participants in the processes of urban planning, together with specialized technicians, politicians and adult members of the established communities. Hence, local governments and municipalities should strongly consider and actualize article 12 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child In order for this to happen, there has to be a cooperative work between the planning department of each municipality and the nearby schools and teachers. The participatory sessions to discuss children's views and agenda and to elaborate proposals about environmental and urban planning should take place in schools. Formative sessions about CIM and about children's public participation should be developed in schools aiming to alert parents on those former issues.

Conclusion

The results from the first large scale analysis of children's independent mobility in Portugal reveal that Portuguese children have low levels of independent mobility (10th place in the international CIM ranking), which are influenced by different factors. Besides the individual factors (e.g., age and gender of the child and parental concerns), factors related with the social (e.g., social danger perception) and physical environment (e.g., availability of safe routes for children) also influence the levels of CIM.

The pervasive motorized culture of public use of space in Portugal was identified as a specific cultural factor that constraints CIM in our country. As the number of cars on the roads increases, the danger on the roads also increases and pedestrian traffic ceases. In addition, in the Portuguese culture, primary school children are not considered to be



competent to get about on their own, being socially accepted that “good” parents drive their children to and from school and to and from other places, even if those places are within a walking distance. Participative local sensitive and child-centred projects are necessary to change some environments and to change the idea of children’s incompetence to deal with those environments. Parents should be informed about the physical, cognitive and social benefits of active and independent mobility. Through these initiatives, social structures that protect children while supporting higher levels of CIM can be created.

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FREE PLAY

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Abstract:

In the very early years everything is a play and every single object is a toy for a child. The first toys of the child are its hands and arms, its feet and legs. The child tramples almost permanently and these rhythmic movements are enough play for the child, they are joyful power development. The dynamics of its unfolding bodily energy produces pleasure. Through this enjoyment also learning is developed. The child explores the world through play, language, movements, the born gift imitation and hands-on activities. Thanks to such free play all our senses, our heart and our brain is stimulated. Accordingly we gain various abilities to live this life.

Rudolf Steiner says, “The real educational value of play lives in the fact that we ignore our rules and regulations, our educational theory and allow the child free rein. During the play the child lives fully in ‘here and now’, nobody should disturb or interfere but support with patience and compassion. The child puts the meaning in every object that should serve as a toy. Rich imagination and open-ended plays make children think creative. Children play to connect their inner experiences with the outer world. The task of the teacher is to create an environment that supports the possibility of healthy play. (Rudolf Steiner) In Waldorf pedagogy every child has the right to play, unmonitored, unstructured free and open play.

Schiller says that: “Only when we play are we fully human, and we play only when we are human in the truest sense of the word.”

Key words: Free play, imitation, creativeness, disclose child’s own potential, fairy tales, puppets show

Introduction:

Life journey of a child begins with an embryo in a uterus and completes the whole evaluation process, at last born as of human being. After that, children need to learn to be a part of the community. It is not so easy, apart from the other animal groups human communities are