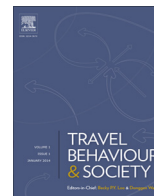




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## Association of children's mobility and wellbeing: A case study in Hong Kong

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on primary school children in Hong Kong, where their 1) travel behaviour and mobility (school and scheduled activities), 2) autonomy in their daily lives (perceptions and self-esteem), 3) psychological wellbeing (how they rate their happiness in different situations) and 4) interrelationships of the above three aspects were investigated. The research team surveyed 393 primary school students at two selected schools, through face-to-face questionnaire surveys using a variety of question types, such as multiple choice, ordered category items and semantic differential ratings, providing respondents with the opportunity to convey their views within a reasonably structured format. It was found that a majority of children's journeys associated with school and scheduled activities were completed on foot or by public transport, with over 80% accompanied by an adult. As expected, children engaging in active transport rated their journeys as happier than those using motorised transport. Accompanied children also rated their journeys as happier than their unaccompanied counterparts, suggesting that more research about independent mobility from the perspective of the children themselves is needed. Children who perceived themselves more capable of taking care of themselves independently rated their lives as happier than those perceiving themselves to be less able. The findings of this study suggest that children's wellbeing can be affected by many factors, including their own self-esteem, perceived road safety, active travel and independent mobility, amongst other factors. Cities should plan for neighbourhoods that are safer for children to use, socialise and travel in, for the sake of promoting children's wellbeing.

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### 1. Background

'Mobility' refers to "[t]he ability to move or be moved freely and easily" (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). In transport geography, this broadly translates to how easily individuals move or are moved (via one or multiple transport modes) from one place to another through the transport system. Gauging mobility requires a good understanding of humans' travel behaviour through the transport system to engage in different activities, separated by space (Rodrigue et al., 2006). There has been an increasing body of literature in recent years dedicated to research on children's travel behaviour and mobility, often described as 1) whether children's journeys are made independently, i.e. unaccompanied or unsupervised by adults; and 2) whether active (non-motorised) transport modes, like walking and cycling, are used (Fyhri et al., 2011; Lam

and Loo, 2014; Waygood and Kitamura, 2009; Harten and Olds, 2004; Armstrong, 1993).

Very much intertwined with mobility, the concept of "wellbeing" can be dissected into three facets: psychological, social and physical (Pressman et al., 2013). Especially in the context of psychological wellbeing, which is further differentiated by Dolan and Metcalfe (2012) into evaluative (overall satisfaction), experiential (momentary emotions) and eudemonic (purpose and self-actualisation) measures, the relationship between travel behaviour and different measures of psychological wellbeing of children is not well understood. While eudemonic wellbeing does not have any immediate linkage with children's travel behaviour, measures of overall and momentary wellbeing have practical psychological, social and economic applications (e.g. Helliwell and Barrington-Leigh, 2010) and have been used in geographical time-space analysis of everyday activities (e.g. Schwanen and Wang, 2014), amongst various other disciplines.

More specifically in terms of children's mobility and wellbeing, Ramanathan et al. (2014), Romero (2015) and Westman et al. (2013) show that active mobility among children is linked to various psychosocial benefits in momentary wellbeing in the western

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world, but whether this holds true in an East Asian context is not well studied. Also, whether independent and active travel amongst primary school children is associated with more positive evaluative wellbeing (e.g. life satisfaction) remains to be examined in both the western and East Asian contexts. This study also introduces a fresh perspective in investigating children's scheduled activities and associated travels, in addition to the more typical studies that only discuss journeys to and from school. Investigation of children's scheduled activities are an important complement to the general children's mobility literature. This study thus serves as the starting point to fill in these research gaps, in order to better understand the different dimensions of active and independent travel of children. This study also investigates how children's travel characteristics, amongst other key factors, affect wellbeing of children, in experiential (momentary) and evaluative (overall) terms.

This study draws upon the above literature to examine the question of whether higher levels of mobility and autonomy for children have any effect on attitudinal measures of psychological wellbeing, through the children's lens. Through questionnaire surveys, it is possible to consider how children rate different experiences (momentary wellbeing) and evaluate the domains of school and life in general (overall wellbeing), via the concept of "happiness". It is easier for primary school students to understand and describe how "happy" they are, instead of relatively more difficult concepts such as "satisfaction" or "wellbeing". Furthermore, children's own perceptions of their surroundings and self-confidence in daily life provide a voice for the children themselves, such as in previous work by Page et al. (2010) and Tonucci and Rissotto (2001). Children's perspectives are important and deserve more research and recognition. Parents have considerable influence over their child's travel, so listening directly to the child's views, as this study intends, provides an opportunity for adults to work towards improving children's psychological wellbeing with a better comprehension of children's own perceived capabilities and preferences.

Age is a major factor in influencing levels of independent mobility among children, and is often a determinant of when children are ready to safely navigate the street network and neighbourhood environment alone (e.g. Fyhri et al., 2011; Lam and Loo, 2014). The

concept of mobility licences was first proposed by Hillman et al. (1990) to identify when parents would allow their children to do certain things outside of home independently, such as to cross roads, go out after dark, leave school, etc. Parental perceptions on neighbourhood safety and belief in their child's ability to navigate these potential hazards have already been shown to greatly influence children's travel behaviour (Susilo and Liu, 2015; Waygood and Susilo, 2015; Alparone and Pacilli, 2012; Panter et al., 2010). The Italian study by Alparone and Pacilli (2012, p. 113) studied this as the "maternal perception of positive potentiality of outdoor autonomy", i.e. how the mother decides if her child is ready to navigate the outdoors independently, judged by daily ability to take care of themselves, being responsible, socialising skills, and other factors. With parental concerns discussed quite widely in the literature, this study's incorporation of children's own self confidence and perceptions, as discussed in the above paragraph, is a contribution to the literature from a novel, understudied angle.

Formulated from the above and based on the Hong Kong context, a conceptual model has been constructed and is shown in Fig. 1. Conceptually speaking, this study aims to examine children's overall wellbeing, in particular their satisfaction with life, with the factors of 1) children's socio-demographic characteristics, 2) their activities, 3) travel behaviour, 4) self-confidence, perceptions and knowledge and 5) momentary wellbeing. The specific dimensions marked by asterisks fall within the scope of this study, listed along with some other important factors that are worth future consideration, though this is by no means an exhaustive list. To be specific, a list of aims based on the conceptual model is detailed henceforth. The first aim of this paper is to study children's travel behaviour for journeys to and from school and all scheduled activities, among selected groups of Hong Kong primary school children, and how the travel characteristics vary for children of different age and gender. The second aim is to understand children's subjective feelings of their happiness of different experiences (momentary wellbeing) and in the domains of school and life in general (overall wellbeing), in terms of children's age, gender and travel characteristics. The third and final aim is to tie all the strings together, in terms of children's socio-demographic characteristics, self-confidence, perceptions, travel behaviour and momentary wellbeing. This

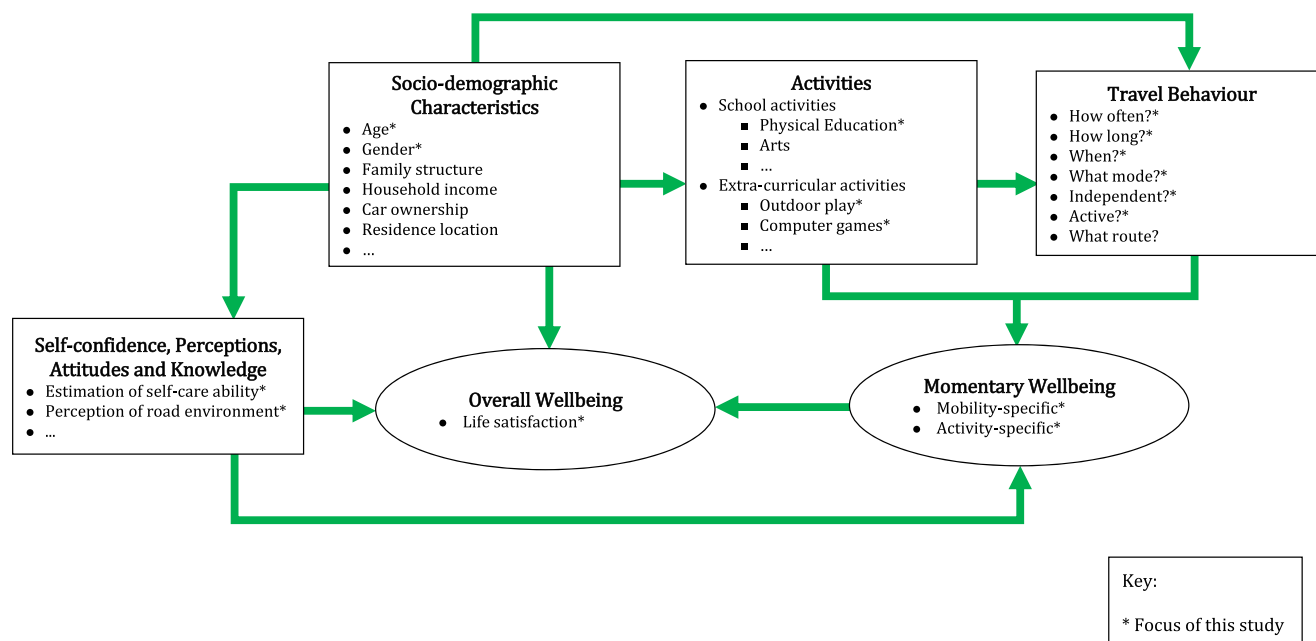


Fig. 1. Conceptual model for analysing children's mobility and wellbeing.

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