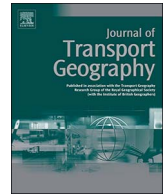




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# Children's incidental social interaction during travel international case studies from Canada, Japan, and Sweden<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Incidental social interactions such as seeing a known person while travelling are theorized to contribute to community connections and social capital. It is argued in such work that walking may be a critical factor, but the frequency of such interactions is generally unknown. For children, these community connections may increase independent travel and contribute to their well-being. Previous research out of Japan found that walking was indeed more likely to result in children seeing people in general and seeing a known person. However, it is not clear whether that is a culturally anecdotal finding, or whether similar findings would occur in different cultural and transportation contexts. Reasons why it may be anecdotal include: in most cases, all elementary school children walk to school in Japan; many trips occur at a local level and are conducted by non-motorized modes in Japan; greeting others (*aisatsu*) is a cultural value in Japan. This study examines whether one's transport mode relates to having incidental social interaction during their trips for children aged 10–11 in Canada (177), Japan (178), and Sweden (144). Further to previous work, the research carried out here asked the children what type of interaction occurred (spoke, waved, no interaction, or other) which would relate to building or maintaining community connections. The findings demonstrate that the results are internationally applicable and that most incidental social interactions result in a verbal communication in all three countries.

## 1. Introduction

Previous research has found relationships between children's travel and incidental community connections (Waygood and Friman, 2015; Waygood and Kitamura, 2009). That research showed that children who walk and who travel independently were more likely to see others during travel, and, in particular, to see others that they knew. However, the survey was conducted in Japan where a cultural value is placed on saying hello to others (*aisatsu*). As well, as highlighted recently in a review of literature on transport and child well-being (Waygood et al., 2017) anecdotal results (i.e. results from one country/city) need to be tested in diverse contexts to test whether the results are consistent or not. Thus, the question remains whether the findings are robust; would they be found in other cultures or locations? Further, related to building or maintaining community connections, when the children notice others, what type of interaction occurs (e.g. simply notice the other, wave, speak, or some other interaction)?

Social connections are important for building and maintaining social capital and community cohesion, but also in general, social relationships. Mental health measures such as social relationships were found to have a higher impact on mortality than alcohol consumption, physical activity, body-mass index (obesity), and air quality; and the impacts are not age-dependent (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). As well, Helliwell and Putnam (2004) found that neighbourhood and community ties support both physical and subjective well-being. Important to the current research, Helliwell and Putnam also cite work showing a positive relationship between social networks and improved child welfare. Thus, social relationships are important for health, but most studies on the relationships between children's travel and their health and well-being have focused on physical aspects such as active travel (e.g. Bates and Stone, 2015; Schoeppe et al., 2013) or collisions (e.g. Rothman et al., 2014; Toroyan and Peden, 2007). Further to links with mortality, social relationships are also a strong explanatory factor of subjective well-being, which is a person's evaluation of their overall

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well-being. This is again true for both adults and children (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2011; Park, 2004).

Children's transportation and health and well-being research has focused primarily on active travel, while little has examined how transportation might influence social interactions. There are numerous types of social interaction including planned, spontaneous, virtual, or face-to-face. They can happen at a destination, but they can also happen during a trip. Sociologists (e.g. Grannis, 2011) suggest that walking in a neighbourhood can contribute to social capital as individuals will incidentally see others, and then gradually develop these incidental interactions into conversations and deeper social relationships. In transportation literature, Carver et al. (2005), using a questionnaire on general travel behaviour and general perceptions of neighbourhood, found that children who reported walking for transport were statistically more likely to have responded that they waved or talked with their neighbours.

Incidental community connections can help build social capital. Grannis (2011) explains four steps starting from two individuals that do not know each other but have geographic proximity. The possibility of walking to local destinations creates the chance that those individuals would see each other. If this is frequent enough, familiarity would increase, and some social interaction could develop (e.g. nodding hello, smiling, small talk, etc.). Eventually, this may lead to intentional social interaction (e.g. visiting the neighbour's home). Through this process, Grannis argues how a walkable, mixed-use environment might support social capital in a community. Related to this, a study that compared highly walkable neighbourhoods to ones with low walkability found that children depicted in drawings of their neighbourhoods more active travel and peer interaction in the highly walkable neighbourhoods (Holt et al., 2008). Waygood and Friman (2015) also found that the most urbanized areas had the most incidental community connections.

Walking and independent travel were associated with a greater likelihood of seeing others and seeing people that the children knew while travelling (Waygood and Friman, 2015). However, the sample was from one region of Japan and it may have been an anecdotal finding. Thus, would the result hold for a different area of Japan that is less urban? Further, as Japan values and encourages greeting others, as well as having a population that walks at high rates (e.g. Susilo and Waygood, 2012; Waygood and Kitamura, 2009; Waygood et al., 2015a) it may be an anecdotal finding for that country. As well, few trips by the children in Waygood and Friman (2015) were by car, which may not reflect the reality of some Western countries. Thus, would the results hold in a country where the majority of travel by children is now by car?

The scientific objectives of this research are to determine whether a) are the results robust (e.g. can they be replicated)? b) Would the relationship hold for countries where much more of children's travel is by car?

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Community connections

For children, the benefits of better community connections include improved social skills, social interaction, well-being and safety. Interactions with adults, particularly adults who are not the child's parent(s) were associated with improved social skills for the child (Azuma et al., 1992). Such adults could be described as alloparents,<sup>1</sup> who can provide other important benefits such as safety and support (see below).

Social interactions help children to feel a sense of community (Pretty et al., 1996). If a child has strong community connections, then they may be more likely to have social interaction while travelling or

performing some activity in their community. Such face-to-face interaction, as opposed to on-line interaction, has been found to be the most important factor in establishing and sustaining social interactions (Urry, 2002). Positive social interactions and opportunities for identity development were found to enhance connection to the children's environment (Depeau, 2001). Relationships with members of a child's community play a role in building social networks known to affect children's well-being and a sense of belonging (Compas et al., 1986).

Social interaction and a sense of belonging are also important contributions to subjective well-being and quality of life (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2011; Helliwell and Putnam, 2004; Sirgy, 2012) which also applies to adolescents and young children (Park, 2004; Pretty et al., 1996). For adults, having frequent interactions with friends and trusting one's neighbours and community are related to life satisfaction and happiness (two key elements of subjective well-being) as well as physical health (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004). Well-being and social relationships are associated and the absence of loneliness makes children healthier. Having friendly neighbours is negatively related to feelings of loneliness or experiencing sadness in adults (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004). Although this last relationship has not been demonstrated for children, it would seem intuitive that similar results would be found for them.

For well-being in life it is important for children to be in contact with and interact with other known people, to have parents that protect them and treat them well and to have a personal, safe place to be (Fattore et al., 2007; Pollard and Lee, 2003). The interactions can be 'bonding' where the child would make connections with other children, or 'bridging' where the child would make links with those dissimilar to themselves (e.g. adults, children of different ages or contexts). Feeling and being safe is an important part of children's subjective well-being (focuses on how children are feeling, often operationalized as degree of valence and activation). For children's well-being, Westman et al. (2013) found that children who travelled to school by car experienced significantly less activation (i.e. to a higher extent they felt tired, sleepy, and dull) than those who biked to school. A lack of social interactions with others apart from their family could be part of the explanation of why children experience a lower degree of well-being when they go by car.

Community connections can influence the sense of safety for the child and their parent(s). One reason is that known people may make the children feel secure and, if needed, provide help. Depeau (2001) found that for youth, 'the possibility of casual social interaction with people they knew, whether an adult or a peer, was certainly an attribute that allowed children to feel confident about being in a place, especially if they were alone' (pg. 85). Parents may gain a sense of safety through what is termed 'high visibility' (Bonner, 1997). High visibility is used to describe how someone is always around observing behaviour, and any bad behaviour by children would eventually make it back to parents. The parents of Bonner's study (Bonner, 1997) felt that if their children were always near someone they knew, their behaviour would be more restrained (they would not do bad things without someone who knew them finding out), and a known person could help if the need arose. In children's travel literature that concept was described by McDonald (2005) who commented that common sense suggests that parents' willingness to allow children to travel independently depends on their trust of their neighbours to act on behalf of their children, both to protect their safety and control their bad behaviour. This echoes Hillman et al. (1990) who proposed that the higher independent travel by West German children (to British children) could potentially be explained by cultural differences.<sup>2</sup> Those thoughts are supported by Prezza et al. (2001) found that Italian mothers with a high amount of neighbourhood relations were more likely to grant their child

<sup>2</sup> In Germany it is socially acceptable for adults to verbally discipline unknown children in public, whereas this is not the case for modern English-culture.

<sup>1</sup> Alloparents are defined as adults who help raise a child, despite not being a parent.

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