"You Need Eyes on Your Back"
A study of perception of children's risks among parents in a Dutch suburb.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE STUDY AREA

Bilthoven is a suburb situated four kilometers away from Utrecht in the Netherlands. Together with De Bilt township, Bilthoven forms the local Authority known as Gemeente. (This is a kind of urban council) which is situated in the province of Utrecht. There was no official information available separately about the population of Bilthoven but information obtained from the town hall give the population of the two townships as 33000. And the area covered by the local Authority is 2871 Ha.

De Bilt is a typical suburban residential area with people living here and working elsewhere mainly in Utrecht and other nearby cities. There are a number of institutions here which also constitute a part of the employing bodies. KNMI which is the National Meteorological Center is situated in Bilthoven. Also situated here is the Government Research Center for hygiene and Public Health.

A large number of the population here is from the upper middle class and the middle class although people from the lower middle class also live here. More upper middle class people live in Bilthoven which has beautiful scenery with lots of beautiful wooded surroundings. De Bilt and Bilthoven South have more of lower middle class and low class characteristics.

There are child services here for the two townships; twelve official child play centers, one advisory center on child care, and a number of Child abuse centers. These are centers where cases of child abuse can be reported for proper action or rehabilitation. There are also adoption centers for troubled children. A Children’s Hospital is available in Utrecht to serve the needs of the inhabitants of De Bilt and Bilthoven.
1.2 INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There exists a dearth of literature on risk but most of the literature available is from the perspectives of other disciplines. Douglas (1986) has argued that although risk perception has received considerable attention from psychologists, economists and organizational theorists, there has been little study of the cultural influences on risk perception.

Thompson 1980 (in Adams 1996:ix) has also argued for the case of cultural analysis of risk. His thesis holds that we make use of cultural analysis of risk guided by assumptions and inferences about risks when scientific facts fall short of certainty. This theory therefore scuttles verifiable single right answers to questions about risks derivable by a unique rationality but seeks to make explanations in the differences about risk perceptions. The argument here is that there will always be different viewpoints about the subject of risk but the onus lies in Anthropologists to seek common ideas and to identify common premises from which these arguments about risks are based.

This perspective looks at risk not as a measurable objective construct, but as an uncertainty which we learn to cope with as part of our development process. It is a likelihood of exposure to a given harm; an anticipation of future events. Because it is something we learn to cope with, it becomes part of our socialization process within our cultures. (see Green 1996)

This study seeks to make use of this thesis about cultural analysis of risk as the starting point to the exploration of perception and management of childhood risks. This paucity of works on cultural analysis of risk also makes for the choice of the study.

Douglas, in her writings with Wildavski, (See Douglas and Wildavski 1982:8) have observed that risk is a culturally constructed concept and every society selects certain dangers for attention through what they call social bias. The study of risk through
traditional Anthropological methods such as key informant interview and observation therefore presents a valuable means of understanding risk perception in its context.

Being a member of a different culture, my perception of certain dangers were shaped differently by my own culture, therefore when I came to the Netherlands, my attention was drawn to certain childhood risks in this society and I wanted to learn more using Anthropological techniques about how members of this culture perceive these risks. One of the issues that struck me was the idea of seeing a mother going on bicycle shopping spree with two little children all less than two years old (one on the back and the other in front of the bicycle). It came to my notice later that this was not an isolated occurrence but it is a common practice here.

Bicycles are an important means of transport in the Netherlands both for adults and children. From my perspective the idea of going on bicycle rides with toddlers presents an obvious risk due to their vulnerability in the event of occurrence of an accident.

Reports have also indicated that in the Netherlands small children are particularly prone to cycling accidents (see Hirasing 1997:29). Children here start cycling at a tender age yet their physical developments do not enable them to ride safely. They therefore remain exposed to the risk of accidents but parents do not appear to be discouraged by this.

Accidents at home have also been reported. At the order of their fatality, drowning is placed first at 46%, followed by suffocation at 25%, falling 8%, burns 7% and poisoning at 3%. However for hospital admissions for home accident cases, falling was the leading cause with 46% of a total number of 13,005 admissions of children 14 years and under. (Hirasing 1997:28). In a report by Peters J, (1990) accidents within the household accounted for the highest number of reported child accidents(3920) for children below the age of five years by the year 1990. Street traffic accounted for 1054 cases of accidents.
At a more practical level, my interest in childhood risks had a link with a study I intended to carry out before leaving for further studies in the Netherlands. I had proposed to study the perception of risk and treatment seeking practices of measles in children under the age of five in a Kenyan village. It has been observed that in the Netherlands, illnesses are not important cause of mortality due to a well-developed health care system. Measles like all other immunisable diseases had been eradicated here. My interest therefore shifted to a general study of perception of childhood risks.

It has been reported that child mortality caused by infectious diseases has decreased whereas mortality caused by traffic accidents has increased both relatively and absolutely. Cot deaths were identified as a major cause of infant mortality and it has been observed that with the launching of a national campaign which identified prone sleeping position as a major cause of cot deaths and promotion of safer sleeping position, cot deaths reduced from 190 infants in 1986 to 50 in 1995. (Ibid.:17). Here we see the influence of the media in risk reduction.

My research has therefore tried to explore the perception of different kinds of risks and the ways in which they are dealt with. It is worthy to note that statistics alone which are often the most common ways of presenting reports of results of risk taking are not enough. I hope that by conducting an exploratory study on risk perception I am making a contribution, albeit small, in the understanding of risks in the context in which they occur.

1.3 OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS
My main objective was to explore perception of childhood risks among parents in a suburb of Utrecht City, The Netherlands.

My specific objectives were;
• To examine past experience of parents trying to relive situations in which their children were involved in imminent danger. Discussions were developed around these incidences to explore how risk is perceived.
To explore the influence of different media sources in the perception and management of risks.

To explore perceptions of risk in the context of family characteristics. I had initially planned to obtain a representative sample of different classes of informants but practical field realities could not make this possible. The sampling method I used (The snowball sampling method) could not provide me with a representative sample of different classes. Within the ambit of family characteristics I examined gender differences in risk perception and management and the underlying reasons for this.

I had initially planned to look at the concept of risk in the context of the domains of health and illnesses and accidents. The focus remained on accidents but not so much on illnesses because the domain of illnesses did not feature often in my discussions about risks.

**Research questions were as follows:**

What are the risks of greatest concern to this study population?
What makes these risks to be of more concern than other risks?
Are there known cases of accidents or near accidents involving children?
Who was responsible for the child at the time of the accident?
Are risks preventable? If so what preventive measures are taken against different kinds of risks?
What messages are there from the media about childhood risk management? How significant are these messages?
What are the principles by which parents teach their children about risk management?
Has there been a generational change in the way in which parents taught their children about different kinds of risks?
Are there gender differences in the way risks are perceived and dealt with within the families?
CHAPTER II

2.0 RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Preparation for a new field reality

Hammersley and Atkinson 1997:54 have mentioned access to the data as one of the problems that looms large in Ethnography. This problem becomes compounded even more if one is undertaking an ethnographic study in a culture other than his own. As they have observed, gaining access is a practical issue that involves drawing on the interpersonal resources and strategies we all tend to develop in dealing with everyday life. So being an ethnographer from a different culture, gaining access and successfully conducting a research here presented me with a special challenge.

It was also the wish of AMMA program Director Prof. Sjaak van der Geest that as many of us as possible should do our field work in the Netherlands rather than doing it back in our own countries. This was more logical because of time constraint and also as he put it, it was going to present us with a unique opportunity of doing ethnography in a culture different from our own.

I took the challenge with stride because I had been in research before but this was the first time I was doing a research in a culture different from my own, let alone a new country all together. The same applied to my colleagues who were from Asia and some like me, from Africa. We therefore deemed it worthwhile to get an idea, however general, about social and family life here in the Netherlands. Therefore as part of our training in research methodology we prepared tools for and carried out a mock research: Dutch students and their interaction with their parents. This research gave us a glimpse of family life in The Netherlands.

Apart from the above we conducted a rapid appraisal using the methodology developed by Varkevissar et. Al. (1993). This rapid appraisal was an important groundbreaking research
because, like what we were going to do, it was an empirical medical anthropology research.

We all came together at the end of the rapid appraisal to discuss the findings and also to share our experiences in class. It was also during the sessions of the Research Methodology classes that we discussed some of the local customs and rules of decorum. Seale has observed that learning about local customs and rules of etiquette is an important step towards achieving success in ethnography. If an ethnographer is aware of local customs, it becomes easier to achieve impression management when the situation calls for it. Confidence can also be built between ethnographers and their informants with more ease in a situation like this. (see Seale1998:226).

Although our field research came nine months after our arrival in the Netherlands and as one may argue that this time was long enough for us to be acquainted with basic field situation here, the realities of our situation would not facilitate this. Six out of thirteen members of our class were living in an all-foreign students hostel so we missed a chance to interact closely with students from this society so that we could learn from them about their culture. Besides the study curriculum was too busy for us to find time to socialize out of school hours. We had a year to complete the MSc program. Within this time we were to finish course work and thesis. However the preparations we got just before going to the field was an important step towards helping us understand the field situation here.

2.2 Field entry and personal experiences
When it came to the field research proper, every individual problem required unique approach to field entry. For my problem, my supervisor and I chose to use the local media as a means of gaining entry into the field. We placed announcements in public places within the study area with a bid to publicize the research. The announcements were placed on the supermarket and social center notice boards two months before I went to the field. We also put an announcement on the local newspaper. My supervisor placed his telephone
number to enable those who were willing to participate to contact him. We never received any offer for participation.

Then, as if by a stroke of luck, there occurred a coincidental meeting between my supervisor and a resident of Bilthoven, Mrs. Patricia Wilken some two weeks before I went to the field. She was later to become very instrumental in assisting me to gain entry into the research community. Through her assistance I was able to find a modest room for accommodation during the time I was in Bilthoven for my field research. Dr. Chris de Beet met Patricia at a public lecture in Bilthoven about traditional religion in Africa.

It was during a chat after the lecture and after learning that Patricia lives in Bilthoven that Chris told her about my research and the request for a contact person. She accepted. He then arranged for an appointment for me to meet Patricia a week after their meeting and from then my hopes for a successful research stint in Bilthoven were strengthened.

I learned later during my stay in the field that Patricia’s act of kindness is a virtue characteristic of her family. Wilken, Patricia’s father-in-law has a history of philanthropic activities dating back to 1955 when he cofounded the Emmaus community in De Bilt, a neighboring suburb of Utrecht City. The Emmaus organization provides food and shelter to the poor and homeless people. The organization has a Center for the homeless junkies and refugees. Some of the refugees housed here are from war torn African countries.

I saw a possibility of conflict of my identity as a researcher and the possible identity which could emerge as a result of living together with the members of the Emmaus community as had been suggested by Patricia.

Seale 1998 has observed that people often place a researcher within their own experience and associate the researcher with the activities of the person acting as a sponsor or gatekeeper( see Seale 1998:225) I thought that there existed a possibility that people could misunderstand my identity if I were to accept to stay at Emmaus community.
There was a possibility that informants who knew what the activities of Emmaus organization were and did not fully understand the purpose of my being in Bilthoven, could mix up my role and that of regular members of the community. If this happened it could have an obvious far reaching implications for my social identity which would in turn influence response I was going receive from my potential informants. The success of my field research was going to be determined by the first impression I created about myself so my position had to be clearly determined right from the beginning.

I feared that if I did not give the impression from the beginning that I was a student out to collect data for my study and not a regular member of Emmaus community depending on handouts from well wishers, perhaps my social standing among the research community was going to suffer a setback. I therefore chose to live on my own in a room provided at the alternative medicine clinic for the Wilken family.

I could determine the course of my research on my own from here and even avoid a possibility of occurrence of Patron-client relationship which often comes about when an ethnographer relies too much on his sponsors or gatekeepers. However as it turned out during my stay in the field my contact persons were very supportive and respectful of my wishes.

I kept close contact with them in spite of the fact that I was living on my own. They family invited me for dinner on a number of occasions and it was their wish that I could come for dinner at their house anytime I wanted as long as I called to inform them in advance. This was of particular significance for my study because it presented me with an opportunity to observe child risk situations within the context of family life.

Much as my contact persons were supportive and receptive, striking a balance was necessary in my interactions with them. I maintained a reasonable level of distance and independence for myself. As the saying goes familiarity breeds contempt. I had a specific intention which was to do an ethnography. And the fact that ethnography involves long
period of human interaction which starts with a gradual process of understanding each other there was a necessity for me to establish to what extent it was acceptable for me to participate in the activities of the family.

It occurred to me that during the course of my field work here, my presence, as a foreign researcher here was conspicuous. Apparently there were less people of African origin in Bilthoven compared to big cities of the Netherlands such as Amsterdam or the Hague. I met very few Black people in the course of my stay and I also had some experiences which illustrate the fact that I stood out conspicuously among the study population.

The fact that I was amongst the few people from my continent living here coupled with the fact that I was here to do ethnography generated interest among those to whom my research was introduced. Little children were particularly excited by my presence during the occasions I went to visit the three schools whose head teachers assisted me to gain access to my informants. There is an isolated incident which occurred during one occasion at Rudolf Steiner school but which I interpreted to illustrate the issue that my foreign background was visible;

I was sitting at a table taking coffee and cookies with Kindergarten schoolchildren together with their teacher after I had played with them and observing them while they were playing by themselves. I joined in their songs and I answered their questions and listened to their comments as translated to me by Marieke their teacher. In the innocence of a child one child asked me ...

"Maurice why are you black unlike everyone else here?"

To me this child’s question brought to the fore the reality that my presence as an outsider was visible and it came out through an innocent uninhibited mind of a child. I was however, convinced at the end of the study that my position as an outsider did not negatively affect the response I received for my research.
On the contrary, I developed the impression that the fact that I, an African ethnographer, here to study the local people’s way of life aroused excitement amongst my informants. In most of the occasions I granted a chance for my informants to ask questions they were curious to find out why I was studying child care in the Netherlands and not my own country. I also had to answer their questions about myself and my society.

What occurred between me and my informants was exchange of information where I asked questions for my research and answered their questions about life in my own society at the end of the interviews. I therefore played the role of a researcher and informant to my own informants who were also eager to learn from me.

This is what transpired during another occasion. This time I had gone with the family of my contact person to a visit to some friends in Wageningen;

We had just arrived and met a group of four women who had arrived earlier for the birthday party of the first born child of one of Patricia’s friend when her husband started asking for a chance to introduce me.

Jean Pierre: May I introduce Maurice to you!
(At this time, the attention of everybody was focused on me)
Maurice Kong’ong’o is a Kenyan student studying medical Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He is at the moment in the field to study how we take care of our children!
The reaction to this introduction was that of pleasant surprise.
One of the women reacted first;

‘... aah that is brilliant! Whose idea was it that you do your field research here, was this your original idea!?’

And with an equal humorous sarcasm I answered;
"You people from the Western societies often come to our societies to conduct Anthropological studies, this is now our turn to study your way of life as well!"

We laughed off this remark and went into talking about the focus of my research and study. But as it turned out I never had the chance to interview any of these women because they lived far off my research area. I however took it that their views were a reflection of the views of the larger society in which I was doing my ethnography.

The other observation I made was that some potential informants were willing to participate but they were unable to schedule their time to fit with mine or they just did not have time at all for the interviews due to pressure of work. One informant asked for the questionnaire to fill it in and return it to me later, not knowing that ethnographic studies require focused open ended interviews in which the interviewer has to be present to guide the flow of the interview. I explained the reasons why I preferred face to face interactive interviews rather than questionnaires or telephone interviews.

There was generally positive response from the informants I was able to make appointments with and interview. They were very enthusiastic open, honest and interested. This is because I also strove to be open and genuine in my interactions with them hence being able to build an atmosphere of sociability between myself and them. This is what Hammersley and Atkinson (1997:89) have observed as a prerequisite to the process of establishing trust which in turn creates an atmosphere conducive for a successful ethnographic research.

My conclusion therefore is that rather than being an impediment to my study, my position as an outsider was to my advantage. As an outsider to a foreign culture I was able to get away with what Hardon et al. (1995) has referred to as some of the 'stupid' but very vital questions which ethnographers, eager to learn a foreign culture often ask. My informants had no reason to assume that I knew about their ways of life so they answered every little probing questions which I asked them directly. The scenario was sometimes different
when I asked questions through the interpreters who happened to be from the western
culture. At one point an informant even acted as if it was my interpreters investigating by
asking her in response to one of my questions;

"How can you fail to know about the changes occurring in this society and you
belong here."

It was for this reason that I changed my strategy and only had three occasion when I had
to rely on the interpreters throughout the interview period, otherwise I often asked
questions directly and only relied on the interpreters to come in when the questions were
not clear enough to the informants. The interpreters were however always at standby to
translate when the informants found difficulties in expressing certain important issues in
English or when my questions were not clear enough..

2.3 The process of selecting informants.
I had six weeks within which to collect data and another six weeks within which to write
up my findings. I realized that if I relied entirely on Patricia for getting informants I would
lag behind schedule. She had her own daily programs to attend to and it was therefore
only fair enough for me to make my own efforts as well. I therefore to employed the help
of three teachers as entry points in addition to relying on Patricia’s efforts. Through the
help of these teachers, I was able to obtain informants and by a snowball technique these
informants also introduced me to other informants.

Besides the issue of time as a reason for deciding to make my own efforts at getting
informants, I thought that by doing this I would avoid selection bias in which the chances
would be that that a large number of my informants were going to be from a specific
network of friends with specific common ideas about issues. Using this strategy was also
my way of avoiding problem of what Seale calls, the client-patron relationship in which a
researcher is allowed access only to informants who share same school of thought as the
person who acts as the pointperson. This kind of situation often occurs where there is
something at stake and it often leads to bias and therefore constituting a threat to validity of data collected (see Seale, 1998).

Patricia’s assistance was crucial because through her I was able to get acquainted with the local networks within the study area. In fact the idea of using schools as entry points was mooted to me by her. The first attempt at getting informants was through The Rudolf Steiner school where her children go. My first introductory meeting occurred there when I accompanied her to the school’s open day. I had the chance to meet Marieke, the school’s playgroup teacher with whom I was able to make an appointment for an interview. Through her, I was able to get access to one parent who through a snowball method introduced me to other parents.

Due to my objective of looking at gender issues in perception of risks I planned to interview both male and female informants but my initial attempts to reach male informants were not successful. I had the initial plan of interviewing female informants first then do the male interviews afterwards but time moved so fast and no male informants were forthcoming even at the time when I felt that I had had enough female informants.

However the situation was that in a number of occasions some of the female informants arranged the appointments to suit their husbands presence. I therefore found myself interviewing couples but in order to minimize them from influencing each other’s answers I focused my questions on the particular individual whose views I was interested in getting. I occasionally included the views of the spouses, however.

I extended my research to be able to obtain enough male informants. I used the strategy of reaching the informants required through the assistance of previous informants. Some of the female informants whose husbands were not present during the interviews made appointments for me to go back and interview their husbands as well.
The conclusion I made from this is that child care is the task of women. It was my obvious inference: Everyone whom I requested to make an interview with did not think that I could require male informants. All my initial offers were from female informants. Even the men from whom I asked for assistance initially introduced me to female informants. It was not until I came out of my way to state that I was interested in both the male and female parents that I received offers for interviews from male informants. As my findings revealed it is women who spent most of the time with children.

2.4 Data processing and analysis
I recorded the interviews verbatim on audio tapes. I had an average of one interview per day and so enough time was available for immediate transcription of the interviews. I assigned numbers and pages to all the transcribed interviews so that I could find them easily when I wanted to make references during the time of analysis and writing up. I kept the real names of the informants in the scripts and in the final write-up. Keeping informants’ real names and their short profiles enabled me to recall their images and clearly contextualize the interviews at the time of analysis.

Some authors have cited ethical reasons in explaining why the identity of informants should remain concealed. This is often the case when the information gathered is deemed likely to jeopardize the security of the informants or when it is likely to compromise their privacy in one way or another. I did not consider my study to be likely to compromise either the privacy or the security of my informants. I as well asked for permission from some of them to keep their real identities.

In addition to keeping a record of my interviews, I as well kept records of my daily experiences and observations and debriefing notes from my discussions with my field assistants.

I developed codes in the course of the data collection process. I used these codes to summarize and order my data according to the objectives of my study as suggested in
Varkevisser et al (1991). The codes were necessary because I had several interviews resulting from open ended questions format which usually do not allow for creation of consistent sequence of interviewing. With the help of the codes, I organized the data and created a data matrix on which I displayed the summary of my findings. The codes made it easy to summarize the interviews in a matrix. From the matrix, I identified common themes emerging from the interviews that I translated into a narrative analytical text.

2.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

2.5.1 Time.

The period of six weeks in which I was to conduct the study was apparently not enough for me to exhaust all the information about how informants perceived and managed childhood risks. The other limitation in terms of time is in relation to the season during which the research was conducted. This research was conducted during the beginning of summer when most families were preparing to go out for holiday. I managed to reach the target of the number of informants I wanted but by the time I finished collecting data many people had gone for holidays such that if I wanted to do follow-up interviews it would have been a problem reaching them within the allotted time frame.

2.5.2 Language

My inability to speak and understand the Dutch language was a handicap to me as a researcher. I was convinced that if I spoke and understood the language it would have been easy for me to gather additional data from unsolicited discussions which often went on in my presence during the times when I was not in formal interview situations. At times when I was out for visits I asked those around me for translations of what went on around me I am sure these could not have yielded as much as what I could gather on my own.

English is supposed to be the second unofficial language in the Netherlands but my experience was that not everyone I talked to knew the language well enough to sustain a long discussion on a focused research on a topic risk perception and child care. Even when I had no clear reason to doubt the competence of some of the informants in the English
language I still deemed it necessary to have an interpreter at a standby to come in if difficulty occurred in translating difficult concepts from Dutch to English.
CHAPTER III

FINDINGS

3.0 Risk of traffic accidents.

3.0.1 Car traffic.
Parents mentioned traffic accident as of particular concern to them because of what they deemed as 'jumpy' character of children and their low sense of judgment. As one parent told me a child can sometimes slip off the parent's hands in a situation where there exists imminent risk of being run over by a car. The general feeling was that children require constant surveillance but this is often difficult to achieve.

Another parent told me that she is particularly worried for her son's safety because her house is next to the road, they do not yet have a fence around it but the five year old child never obeys even when he is explained for the dangers involved in playing too close to the road.

Parents fears are influenced by the fact that children have low sense of judgment hence makes them susceptible to accidents while crossing the road even when in the company of their parents. This is because they do at times make wrong judgments about when to cross the road. This is what a couple told me about a near accident situation involving their five year old son;

Deheer: I was standing at a traffic light with my son on my way home from school. He saw a child friend on the other side of the road and rushed to cross over to where he was. At this time there was a car approaching and I felt completely helpless. If anything happened we would be talking about something different. Thank God, nothing happened!

Alexander: Yes there sometimes arises situations when you can not do anything. Think of a situation similar to this occurring when you have two bags of grocery
on both of your hands. You would not even have the ability to hold the child's hands to keep him in check. You would be very helpless.

This finding is contrary to the hypothesis put forward by Gillham (1996) that children under five years are likely to be less involved in traffic accidents because they often do not travel on the streets unaccompanied by their parents. Statistics have a different meaning here from what the perception of parents is as influenced by their experiences.

However his premise is that when they are involved in accidents it happens when they are pedestrians but the accidents involving 15 to 24 year-olds do occur when they are either the drivers or when they are passengers.

Children were said to be particularly exposed to the risk of traffic especially if they live close to a busy road and with no fence around the house. Parents were particularly concerned about the speed at which some drivers drove their vehicles in total disregard to possible dangers posed to children.

Parents were concerned that at a speed of 50 to 60 kilometers per hour in which some vehicles are driven, it could be very dangerous for children to be close to the roads in the absence of parents. I was living close to a busy road and I observed that my neighbors always made sure that their children were always within their vicinity lest they move out into the road and get run over by a car.

The other reason why parents were concerned about risk of traffic is that children tend to concentrate so much on their games such that they forget to watch out for the dangers of traffic.

At the age of five and below parents felt that the only sure preventive strategy against car accident is through close surveillance of the children but then this is not totally achievable because children will break off the surveillance.
Those families living next to busy road had at least one form of a barrier or another and the main principle is to keep children within the vicinity of adults. There were gates which are built deliberately too high for children to open on their own or fixed with secure locks to keep children in check. Parents also mentioned me that every time children went out of their vicinity parents always made sure that they know that the children are playing somewhere safe within the compound and not next to the road.

Some families had the door locks placed upside down so that children can not open and go out of the house to the road when no grown up person is within their vicinity. One informant told me that the pebbles around his house serves to warn him when burglars are approaching but at the same time they enable him to detect when a child has walked out of the house onto the road.

3.0.2 Risks in Bicycle traffic

The risks involved in bicycle traffic are downplayed because conditions in the country make it a splendid means of transport. The topography of the country is flat therefore makes transport by bicycles suitable and easy. Besides, the roads are designed in such a way that cyclists can travel with minimum risk from other traffic. There are, for example, separate bicycle tracks and traffic lights to control both the movement of motorists and cyclists. Because of this the risk in traveling on bicycles is perceived less serious.

The use of bicycles as a means of transport is so popular children begin to learn how to ride as soon as they muster how to walk well. I confronted my informants with statistics about bicycle accidents involving young children and asked them what their feelings were about the risks their children faced on the bicycles. This is what one informant (Elsbeth) told me and which I also consider to be a reflection of the views of other informants;

"It is quite normal in this society for people to ride bicycles. It is a convenient means of transport. Besides there is so much peer influence such that if your children do not own bicycles. It makes them quite unhappy to see their neighbour’s
children riding when they do not have bicycles. You can’t just stop the children from riding."

There are measures taken to reduce the risk. These measures include the use of bright colored flags visible from a distance mounted behind children’s bicycles. My observations confirmed this finding and the other finding that until children reach a certain age they are not often allowed to ride out to the roads on their own. Informants pointed out that until their children reach at least the age of ten they can only travel on bicycles in the company of adults in case they are traveling away from the residential areas.

I observed little children riding from school side by side with their parents all their bicycles having brightly colored flags tied on long metal rods behind on the back seats. In the event when they traveled with their parents the parents took the opportunity to teach them about traffic rules.

Toddlers were often carried by their parents (mainly their mothers on special seats). These are small children’s seats fixed either in front or at the back of the bicycle. Some bicycles have windscreens on the front seat to shield the eyes of the little ones.

I felt a little uncomfortable to observe some people carrying their children on bicycle drawn carriages. I remember observing this incident where a man was carrying three children on the same bicycle. Two children were on the bicycle on the front and back seats and the third one was being drawn by the bicycle on a special bicycle carriage and he was crossing traffic lights ahead of waiting cars. This made me to be a little nervous because in event of a driver for one reason or another disregarding traffic rules and ramming into the bicycles, it could prove very difficult to save all the children.

I however never observed any accident or near accidents involving cyclists during the entire time when I was in the field. But one informant talked to me about a near accident involving her and her two children. She was carrying her two children from school when a
driver overtook carelessly and forced her to swerve off the road and fall with her two children. No serious injuries occurred. This informant (Mrs Mulder) is a 52 year old mother of three full grown children. This is what she told me about the near miss:

"This accident occurred when my youngest daughter who is currently 16 was six years old. I am now an old parent and this is the time I see the risk more clearly. It is part of our lifestyle so when you are still a young parent you don’t notice the danger readily."

Her 54 year old husband also agreed that it is part of their way of life.
This is what his opinion was as he compared it to a known cultural pastime in Switzerland:

"We are used to this risk. When you are a foreigner you see it more clearly, perhaps. When we went to Switzerland we were also shocked to see parents skiing with their children on their back but those who were engaged in it did not feel it so."

Another informant put it even more succinctly:

"Cycling is as cultural to us as skiing and scatting, children like it very much they would prefer to be taken to school on a bicycle than be dropped by a car."

3.1 Risk of molestation by other children

This was said to be particularly great when the children go out of their parents’ direct control and close surveillance. This is towards the time they approach the age of nine to ten. At this age, children begin to be on their own and parents can not fully keep track of what happens to them. A number of informants observed that children are becoming increasingly cruel against fellow children in recent times. This cruelty comes in forms of beating and verbal molestation. Besides, it was observed that it is increasingly becoming impossible for one to correct the mistakes of a child belonging to another person.

The explanation for this was that there has been change in the society whereby individualism has become a norm in the social setup. Because of individualism the
resulting consequences are that the principle of collective responsibility in child rearing is dying at an alarming rate. So the result is that children get away with mistakes because they know that they are not accountable to anyone else other than their own parents and the law. So they can afford to be cruel to one another and get away with it when their parents are not nearby to correct them. This is what one couple (Marlies Prins and husband) had to say on this issue:

"There is a spoilt boy here in our neighborhood. He bullies every other child in his play group. He is a child from a broken marriage. Recently he broke the mirror of another neighbor's car. The neighbor came to report the incident to me because my son was also in the group. The mother of this child showed up three days later and told me that her son did not do such a thing. Besides, she was saying that even if he had done it the insurance would pay for it!"

**Question:** What happened next?

**Husband:** We paid for the damage as a way of showing to our own son that one should take responsibility for his mistakes... twenty years ago there was a network of neighbors who corrected us when we went wrong. Once I grabbed the hands of a neighbor's child and I was severely reprimanded by another neighbor."

Another informant (Margo) observed that children tend to have a group mentality and as a result of this they end up influencing one another to commit mischief that includes being aggressive towards one another. This is what she says about her son:

"When children are together they influence one another. My four-year-old son is usually shy but when he is in the company of other age mates, I could see him becoming very daring. He goes out with other children and dares others for a fight. This can be dangerous if they were a little older."
Parents observed that children get out of control towards their teen years and become a risk to others and themselves.

The other explanation which was given as possible reason for increased cases of child to child molestation is the tendency of parents to defend the wrongs committed by their children as a way of showing their love to them. According to an informant who is a secondary school teacher, some parents are unrealistically overprotective of their children to the extent that they defend them even when they commit mistakes. This spoils the children because they miss to develop clear and sensitive conscience.

Due to the numerous reported cases of child molestation parents expressed concern when they learnt that their children did not possess strong personality. They were particularly concerned that if their children did not possess strong personal character, they would be susceptible to bullying by other children. One parent expressed to me the fear about his eldest son who was often bullied by another child because he was too soft to fight back. Parents discussed with me about a number of child to child molestation cases both within the neighborhood and the country at large. Although they spoke of some of these cases as being exceptional, their contention was that their own children were as much at risk as the children who had already become victims.

The issue of child molestation also brought up for discussion the issue of parental responsibility in relation to these reported incidences. One of the most widely reported cases and which came up most frequently in the discussions was the incident which occurred in Lelystad last winter. In this incident a three year old girl drowned in a semi-solidified pool of water in a park when she was made to sit on it by two fellow children she was playing with.

Most parents giving their opinion in this case felt that the safety of a child of that age is the responsibility of the parents. According to the popular opinion about this case, the act by the child molesters is abhorrent but there was a general observation that this was a case of
parental irresponsibility on the part of the victim and the molester. This is what one
couple's opinion was about the issue:

**Question:** Some of the informants I talked to mentioned to me about the risk of
molestation by other children, do you have such fear for your children?

**Alexander:** Violence is more in big cities, I don't think that it is a problem here.

**Deheer:** But children have been known to kill other children! Don't you remember
what happened in Lelystad?!

**Probe:** Now, talking about this case of what happened in Lelystad, may you please
tell me more about it.

**Deheer:** It makes me sick to imagine that such degree of cruelty can be displayed
by children against other children. I also do not know what it means to be a parent
to such cruel children!

**Alexander:** I think that if parents know that their children are molesting other
children, they should move in fast to act and correct their children.

**Deheer:** (continuing with the discussion) It is a question of responsibility. I
wonder why a child as young as that was left by her parents to play alone with
other children.

Every informant told me that they can never let their three-year-olds to be in such risky
situations.

### 3.4 Risk of kidnap and possible defilement.

Judging from the response I got from my respondents, this was the most disturbing risk of
all. The informants were not willing to mention it to me readily and it mainly came to the
fore from unsolicited discussions about risk prevention strategies but the response they
gave to this question revealed to me that they were disturbed by it. My conclusions were
that perhaps it was too painful for the parents to even imagine that their little children
could be victims to such kind of cruelty.

Secondly, I thought that because it involved sex to a minor, it was too embarrassing for
informants to discuss with me. This risk was mentioned to me by my very first informant.
She is a clinical psychologist and a mother of a son and a daughter both under five years old. I chose to follow up this risk by remaining keen to get it mentioned but other informants were not revealing as explicitly as my first informant. In situations where I tried to probe about it, my observation was that a discussion about it made my informants uncomfortable. Not only female informants but also male informants appeared to be evasive when I asked directly about the risk of child kidnap and defilement.

It was only until I asked them about prevention strategies when they mentioned to me without my direct solicitation about their fear for this kind of risk. The prevention strategy which I linked to this kind of risk was the kind of warning which parents told me they gave to their girl children. All informants who had girl children mentioned to me that as part of their way of dealing with risks, they warned their daughters against walking alone in the woods and accepting candies from men they did not know.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) have observed that it is not always possible that all the answers to ethnographers' questions come directly from questions asked by the informants. A keen eye for unsolicited responses sometimes provide very important clues to answers to some issues informants may not be readily willing to talk about. I therefore decided to go ahead and made inferences from peoples reactions as well as responses. From casual conversations I had with people some of whom were not even parents yet, I gathered that there existed cases of child defilement and molestation within families.

I learnt that this was not something people would readily talk about. Even if a neighbor suspected that a child was being mistreated he or she would not report it to the authorities until he or she has absolute evidence to that effect. I was told that the principle of loyalty to the family and kindness to children is so strong in the Dutch society such that a case of child defilement and mistreatment within the family is a serious threat to family solidarity so people would keep quiet about it in order not to contradict this fundamental societal principle and value.
By the time of writing this thesis the Dutch media extensively reported an international syndicate involving child kidnapping by people who used the children for Internet child pornography. A Dutch national unearthed the syndicate which involved a ring of rich people from Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Great Britain. Reports indicated that his earlier attempts to bring this crime into fore had even been thwarted by the Belgian police and it was not until he moved out of Belgium to the Netherlands with his secretly gathered evidence that embarrassingly exposed the incompetence of the police that they moved in to act.

If even the law enforcement authorities seemed to have been reluctant to act against this serious cruelty against children then parents have every reason to feel helpless against this kind of risk which they can not have control over. I interpreted their reluctance to talk about it as their way of coming to terms with their helplessness.

By the time of writing this report the July 6th issue of The Algemeen Dagblad Newspaper reported that cases of child abuse doubled between 1989 and 1995 in south of the Netherlands. The report adds that help comes too late and some children do die before receiving help.

3.3 The risk of child maltreatment, the influence of media on risk perception and the issue of parental responsibility.
I often asked informants if they were aware of media reports of child maltreatment by the caretakers and I developed discussions around these cases in a bid to get what their perceptions were of child safety while the children were under the care of other people. Informants were aware of media reports of incidences of child maltreatment both in the Netherlands and neighboring countries in Europe. Some well publicized cases came up during the interviews and I used them to develop discussions around not only the risk of maltreatment but also kidnapping which had been mentioned to me by some informants.
Parents felt that since these cases of child maltreatment were frequently reported in the media, there was no reason to rule out possibilities that their own children could suffer the same fate. Informants particularly recalled a widely reported case which occurred in the United states around the time of my field research.

This was the case of a British born teenage Au pair who was convicted in the United States of shaking to death a two year old child she was caring for. This called to discussion about the risks of leaving a child under the full time care of a young Au pair. The informants were not clear about full detail of the case which was widely reported by all cable T.V channels and major news papers but the unanimity in their response was that because of these kind of risk they ensured that their children were cared for only by people they knew very well and trust.

All told me that in case they left their children under care of somebody else other than themselves it was either someone they knew through a referee or a relative. Age of a baby sitter was also an issue for consideration. A majority of parents felt that the older the person caring for the child was, the more sensitive and conscious she was to emotional needs of the child. In that regard a child crying for hours on end would not exasperate a mature care taker as much as it would happen to a young teenage Au pair.

Some mothers even observed that it takes someone who has undergone the pains of childbirth to develop what they call `motherly instinct`. It was their opinion that one needs this instinct to be able to communicate well and fully understand the needs of little children.

I can conclude that the women see the care of children as a role only they can best undertake. From their responses it is possible to argue that they feel that nature provides them with an instinct which facilitates this role. None of the informants I talked to ever mentioned having had male baby-sitters. Neither did the male informants talk to me about arranging for their children’s baby sitting.
Even in a situation where the caretaker is mature woman, the amount of time a baby-sitter spends with a child was a matter to be taken into consideration. This is what an informant (Lisbeth) said in relation to the discussion about their perception of risk in relation to the case of the British born Au Pair,

"Unlike the situation of the family whose child was being taken care of by this British born Au Pair, I have a part time baby sitter who does not stay with my children full time. In a situation where a child is under the full time care of a young person, sometimes situations like what occurred in this case in the U.S do arise."

**Probe:** So you think that the age of the caretaker is an important factor for the child's well being?"

**Lisbeth:** I think so. I also feel that the situation is also different when the person taking care of the child has not undergone the process of or the experience of child birth. It has something to do with the motherly instinct.

### 3.4 Risk in the context of the family environment.

Risks within and around the house situation includes such risks as the risk of falling down the stairs, risk of electrocution, and risks of injuries caused by tools carelessly placed around the house and the gardens. One informant talked about the risk of cot death and the risk of poisoning from cleaning detergents were also mentioned by some informants.

The risk of falling down the stairs was the most commonly mentioned. Every parent I talked to mentioned to me at least a case of a miss or near miss involving toddlers on the stairs. None of these cases however resulted to serious injuries.

All the houses I visited had both parents' and children's bedrooms upstairs so children were often bound to be upstairs. A number of the staircases within these houses were long and steep. I was often allowed to climb up the stairs on guided tours to check safety.
measures. But in situations where I did not ask for formal permission or when informants did not volunteer to take me round, a chance always became available when I asked for permission to use toilets upstairs.

For the children under the age of five, risks of accidents loom large in the house situation. The parents I talked to mentioned strategies they use to manage these risks but according to them this are just attempts to reduce the risks but as I was told by some parents that children face so many risks 'only guardian angels can take care of them.'

Nearly all the parents I talked to recounted to me cases of miss or near misses which their children were involved in. Their feelings were that these household accidents are so sudden and swift one can not talk of preventing them. They occur within a flash of a second.

The main strategy used is putting stair gate to prevent the child from climbing or descending the stairs when no adult is paying attention.

There are houses where I observed no stair gates but the explanation I was given was that stairs can some times lead to more risk than stairs without them. I was told by this particular informant that children would fall with more force if they tried to climb over the gate than if she was allowed to descend slowly down the stairs. There was also an idea that some element of risk is necessary for the child so even if the stair gates are there, the gates would not be kept closed all the times. Children would be allowed to make attempts to use the stairs on their own so that they get used to it.

Other risks within the house situation included risk of fire, ingesting poisonous substances, risk of injuries caused by items used in the house such as garden equipment and cords for clothes lines.
Every house I visited had a small fire heating point in the living rooms from which the houses could be heated by burning wood fuel. These fireplaces had wire mesh around them serving as protection of accidental spread of fire around the room. By the time I was in the field it was the beginning of summer and so families did not use the fireplaces except for two occasions in the house of Patricia. I observed her seven year old daughter light the fire. She told me that the girl handles fire only when adults were within her vicinity so that should something happen, there would be an adult to take action.

Informants identified the firewood heating place as presenting a possible risk to small children but one informant told me that although some parents do not light the fire when children are in the house for fear of this risk, this is improper because it denies children opportunity to learn the dangers of fire.

The other risk of fire mentioned was within the kitchen often from the cooker. All the households I visited used automatic electric cookers. Parents took different strategies to deal with this risk but some did not take any strategies at all. Some families had the cooking place within the living room while some had kitchens separate from the living room.

Strategies used to prevent toddlers from crawling into the fireplace included use of high child beds where children were placed during time of cooking. These beds are high enough to keep children from climbing over. Some half of the families had cooking place in the living room but without obvious protective measures. As one family (Mr. and Mrs. Pascal) told me,

"May be we need to institute some protective measures but we always hope that even as the situation is nothing will happen."

Some families use removable knobs so that children cannot switch on the cooker when the adults are not available.
3.5 Fear of uncertain future

There was fear by some parents that their children may be influenced into bad behavior by other children of same peer group. There is an example of a mother who was concerned that her son is not strong enough emotionally to withstand bad influence from other children. The negative influence mentioned most frequently was that of taking into socially unacceptable practices such as taking of narcotic drugs. The parents were uncertain about whether their children would certainly escape this influence when they grow up. This is what one informant told me about this risk;

**Question:** Can you please tell me some of the risks you feel your child faces.

**Paula:** ...I am concerned that he may be influenced negatively by other children...he is so trusting yet he is not strong enough to withstand pressure. Besides he is only five but appears too big for his age. So he often plays with children older than him chronologically and psychologically.

**Probe:** Do you have the same concern for your daughter, maybe because of her gender?

**Paula:** No, my daughter is strong and very clear and direct to people.

One parent felt that the future was uncertain because he was not sure whether his children would grow up to be psychologically strong enough to withstand social pressures such as broken relationships.

The risks of uncertain future also exists because there are many negative influence from certain television programs. Parents felt that one can never be sure to what extent these programs would negatively influence the future lives of their children. According to what one informant told me, pornography and violence are the dominating themes in television programs at this particular time. Their effects on the behavior of young children may not
be immediately felt but they do have a negative impact on the children. Parents banked on hope that nothing would go wrong in future when their children became adults.

Parents raised concern that even popular children’s animated films had so much violence related themes. As one mother told me there are more important things in life than sex and violence. This was said to be a risk to the development of the personality of children. There was fear that children might internalize what they watch and hence turn out to develop character traits depicted in what they see.

This is what I was told by an informant (Irene):

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'I am not trying to suggest that sex is bad but I am concerned by the way sex and violence dominate television programs at the present time. There are far much more important things in life other than sex and violence. It is bad for the development of the children. And this is not peculiar to the Netherlands, you find it in all countries in the developed world be it the United States or Great Britain.'
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There was also a feeling that unrestricted television viewing puts children at the risk of loosing their creativity. Children sit and absorb what is available on television hence loosing a chance to engage in creative thinking. One informant also linked violence on television to psychological upset her children sometimes underwent. She told me that whenever her two sons who are three and five watched violent scenes on the television they did experience nightmares during their sleep.

All the informants I talked to said that they put some form of restriction or another on their children’s access to television. Children are instructed not to get access to television unless their parents allow them. This kind of rule was said to be important in ensuring that children watch only what their parents sanctioned. One parent told me that she does not need to issue instructions or put sanctions, she avoids those undesirable programs and her children automatically follow suit.
3.6 Change over time and the implications on perception and management of risks.
I asked informants the kind of changes, which might have occurred over time about perception of and management of risks in children. I was told that risk of traffic has obviously become more because the number of vehicles have also increased more than it was twenty years ago. In that regard, children are more exposed to the risk of traffic at present time. Parents I talked to told me that contrary to what they do to their children, their parents allowed them to play more freely on the streets on their own because there was less danger of traffic.

It was also mentioned that unlike a generation ago family size has become smaller and smaller and more and more women are also taking up salaried employment. So children get less attention from their parents compared to the earlier days where most women basically stayed at home to nurture their children. The family unit is becoming smaller and smaller and there is more and more individualism, which leaves the children in the hands of institutions to take care of them. There is therefore less attention at parental level.

The other change that I was told was with regard to the fear of child defilement. Parents told me that in the olden days there was not much concern about the issue of child defilement but at the moment parents worry more and more about this risk. Children start going to school early and on their own. The parents are in most cases both employed and there is therefore an element of exposure to this kind of risk. This exposure was said to be even more aggravated by the onset of the principle of individualism which has led to loss of common responsibility towards the care of children. Cases of child to child molestation were less because unlike at the present time elders were more at home correcting other peoples children when they went wrong.

The other change has been with regard to the way parents communicate with children about risks. A majority of parents told me that unlike their own parents they were more open to their children in discussing about risks. Most parents told me that their own
parents did not explain as much about risk as they do to their children. Here is an excerpt of a dialogue between one parent and me about the issue:

Maurice: As a mother of a young girl, do you get concerned for your child’s safety when you hear about these cases of child defilement?
Elsbeth: When I was young my mother used to tell me ... ’don’t go out with men you don’t know or accept candies from them’ ... she did not elaborate and I don’t talk to my children like that.
Probe: Why don’t you?
Elsbeth: I think that children know much more about these risks than we may assume. I only have to reinforce it. Our parents would caution us about these things but when we asked why they would tell us ... ‘you will know when you grow up.’ If you fail to tell children there are other sources of information where they can learn from.

3.7 Perception and management of childhood risks: some gender perspectives.
I asked my informants about some conflicting ideas about perception and management of risk in terms of gender in a bid to determine differences which existed as far as this issue was concerned.

There was a general feeling that mothers were more protective and careful about their children’s safety than fathers. Fathers tended to be more permissive and less keen in identifying potential dangers. This observation was made by both male and female informants. The general observation was that this had to do with the fact that children spent most of their time with their mothers and so it followed that mothers understood children’s environment and needs better than fathers. Some mothers felt that it was natural for them to better understand childhood risks than their husbands because ‘all mothers posses a motherly instinct absent in men and childless women.’
I was told of various risk situations which mothers claimed to identify but their husbands seemed to ignore. An informant told me that he often failed to notice the risks inherent in the kitchen when he cooks. His wife would often remind him to turn the handles of the pots towards the wall so that the children would not accidentally pull pots of steaming food from the cooker and burn themselves.

Both male and female informants observed that fathers tend to be permissive towards risks. This is what an informant (Lisbeth) told me about her husband’s attitude towards child risks:

"In general I am more careful than he is. I try to prevent things (read accidents) from happening. For example, when the children are playing on swings I will wait and guide them whereas their father will be there but his attitude would be that of ‘lets wait and see what happens.’ Again when the children are playing in the garden he would not watch them continuously while I would."

These findings are in agreement with the findings of Green (1997: 182) in which men were observed to be lax and ‘lacking common sense’ about the prevention of childhood accidents due to their lack of constant proximity to child care.

3.8 Educational philosophy and childhood risks; some observations from Rudolf Steiner School.
I was interested in examining risk situations at the day care centers and I chose to make observations at the Rudolf Steiner Pedagogisch Vrije School. I chose the school out of convenience because my initial effort at reaching out for informants was made here and Marieke, the play group teacher here was positive about letting me visit and sit around with her during her work. The other reason for choosing the school was the special philosophy of the school. I was interested in examining whether the special philosophy of the Rudolf Steiner school had anything to do with how children were instructed about risks.
The school’s play group had a total of twelve children between the age two and half and five years. It is an elitist school and some parents have been attracted by the school's philosophy while others just chose it out of convenience.

Marieke told me that the philosophy of the play group is the simplified form of the philosophy of the school. The school’s philosophy holds that children are born with several capacities and it is the role of school to assist a child rather than make it develop these capacities. The philosophy holds that in the first seven years a child main preoccupation is with the development of his body. Cognitive learning is not considered important by the school at this stage.

As Marieke put, 'There is no making of those little works with glue as happens with other schools.' It is also important for school to train children to be independent as captured in the Dutch expression 'worden wie je bent'. Preparing of a personality rather than adapting an individual to the society is considered more important.

An atmosphere of safety is therefore created in the play group but the children are allowed to explore their surroundings independently and get used to the risks inherent therein. Children have small wooden wheelbarrows and plastic spades to use for playing with sand. They also have swings and climbers to play onto. Most of the playing objects are blunt but Marieke says that a few sharp ones are there to help them develop sense of danger by experience.

Children are left alone to play independently while being observed with minimum of talking.

Says Marieke,
"If you talk too much to them they would think too much, so you 'let them do things in a dreamy way like a flow of water.' I do give them tips for play but I do not organize them by talking to them a lot."

This attitude is reflected in the handling of potential risk situations. When a child places himself in a situation of potential danger, either the item which poses a potential threat of accident is removed or the attention of a child is drawn away from the object using something else.

Marieke mentioned that there has been only one case of an accident ever. But even this case was exceptional. The child in question had a hyperactive disorder and this accident occurred while she was jumping up and down a table.

Her opinion about responsibility for other peoples children whom she entitled to take care of was consistent with that of two other caretakers I interviewed. They all observed that they strove to be more observant about the safety of the children they were entrusted to take care of by others. In cases where they recounted to me cases of accidents or near accidents, they tended to distance themselves from blame. The implication here is that there appears to be a tendency to avoid blame for misfortune occurring to other’s children while they are being officially being cared for by others.
CHAPTER IV

4.0 CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF RISK: A DISCUSSION.

As I stated in the introduction of this thesis my study sought to make use of traditional anthropological techniques in trying to investigate parents’ perception and management of childhood risks. A discussion of the findings of my kind of research can better be done using a cultural analysis of risk. But before I discuss the findings of my research I seek to revisit the thesis on which the cultural analysis of risk is based.

The term ‘risk’ has been used in different discourses in which it serves different purposes. It emerged slowly from a specialized mathematical development of probability theory in gambling. Here the focus has been on statistical inferences and formal probability theory.

A leading proponent of cultural analysis of risk, Mary Douglas (1986) has observed that Psychologists have given considerable attention to the concept of risk but their concern has been mainly with individual risk perceivers therefore reducing perception of risk as pathological or irrational entities.

Cultural theory of risk brings us somewhat nearer to understanding risk perception by seeking to identify common trends in risk perception and management. Different proponents of cultural analysis of risks have made certain assumptions about the concept. Douglas in her work with Aron Wildavski (see Douglas and Wildavski (1986) have made the following assumptions about risks;

- that risk is a cultural construct and each culture has a set of shared values and supporting social institutions biased towards highlighting certain risks and down playing others.
- that we cannot map all the risks we face but we can act.
- common values lead to common fears (and by implication to common agreement not to fear other things). We choose risks in the same way as we choose social institutions.
Taking the concept of Culture as defined by Tylor 1871 (In Hardon et Al. 1995:3) as: 

"That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society," I proceed to argue as follows:

There is evidence of shared notions about risks perception and management. There exists the shared idea that risks children face are infinite but something can be done about them. I began my interviews by asking informants to tell me what risks their children faced. The reaction to this question was shared by most of my informants; risks are too numerous to be counted. Informants mentioned certain risks which formed a pattern of shared notions by a majority of them. The same applies to the strategies for dealing with the risks.

The parents' fears about their children's safety have been shaped by their subjective ideas about risk which they have learnt as members of the society in which they live. It is not just a retinue of statistical representations which the other authorities use to represent risk.

The findings of this research have established that the risk of bicycle accidents, for example, is in-built but the society has chosen to overlook it because the environmental situation makes the advantages of taking this risk to outweigh the disadvantages. Besides, it is a risk that can easily be controlled by teaching the children about traffic rules.

My other argument is that an understanding of the way people perceive and deal with risk is not only a product of a cultural construction of risk, it is also an explanation to a change in the culture in which they live. Results from this finding show that because of the onset of current so called information age, the current generation of parents are more open in the way they discuss with their children about taboo risks such as risk of sexual assault.

The society has changed in such a way that in current time there exists a dearth of information sources on the topic of sex such that failure to explain well about this risk
certain specific limited number of children. (an average of two). They appeared to want the best for their children to partake of their success. But apparently their perception of conception of love to their children is skewed. They show it through pampering of their children without due regard for their parental responsibility of bringing up responsible future citizens. The end result is a generation of spoilt children who are a risk to themselves and also to the society at large.
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APPENDIX  A short profile of informants.

1) Betty
Age: 41 years old. Mother of two grown up children. She runs a day care center at home with the help of her husband. She has been doing this for the last 12 years.

2) Marieke
Age: 47 years old. She is a mother of 3 grown up children. She trained first as a social worker but is currently the teacher at Rudolf Steiner play group. She took up this job when her last born child became of age, otherwise she had stopped working to take care of her. She has 12 children between the age of 2 to 5 years under her care.

3) Mrs Braada
Age: 37 years old.
No of children: Three, the last of whom is 10 years old
She takes care of children at home. She trained as a nurse but chose to be home to take care of her own children. The best thing to earn a living for her was therefore to be a home daycare center personnel.

4) Paula
Age: 34 years old.
No of children: two. A two year old girl and a five year old boy.
Career: She trained as a midwife but she no longer works. She stays at home to take care of the children.
Husband’s age: 37 years.
Career: A management consultant. He was also my informant.

5) Tineke
Age: 43 years old.
No of children: Two. 6 year old daughter and 4 year old son.
Career: a book keeper to her husband’s sculpture business.

6) Ellen
Age: 35 years.
No of children: Two. A 2 year old daughter and a 4 year old son.
Career: Trained and worked as a sales promoter until her first child was born when she decided to be home to take care her children. Her husband is a manager.

7) Elsbeth
Age: 40 years old. Divorced.
No. of children: Three. Two daughters, 7 and 16 year olds and a 9 year old son.
Career: She is an astrologer working at an alternative medicine clinic.

8) Margo
Age: 37 years old.
No. of children: Two sons. A 4 year old and a 2 year old.
Career: A bank teller.
Her husband holds a middle level management position. He is also 37 years old. I interviewed them together.

9) Lisbeth.
Age: 34 years old.
No. of children: Two sons. 2 and 4 years old.
Career: A freelance (consultant English teacher).
Her husband is a 34 year old manager of a housing company.

10) Alexander
Age 37 years old.
No. of children: Two sons. A 3 and a 5 year old.
Career: A lawyer by training and currently works as a public prosecutor.
Wife’s career: A 37 year old senior university student in human communication.
I interviewed them together but focused mainly on him after initial difficulties in getting male informants.

11) Lyon
Age 47 years old.
No. of children with first marriage: 3 grown up children.
No. of children with 2nd Marriage: 2 children a one year old girl and a three year old boy.
Career: An audio visual journalist and freelance movie maker.
12) Mulder
Age: 53 years old.
No. of children: A father of 3 grown up daughters.
Career: A medical consultant. Wife is 52 years old also medical practitioner but specializes in alternative therapy such as acupuncture. I interviewed him together with the wife.

13) Kees
Age: 38 years old.
No. of children: A father of 2 boys; 1 and 2 year olds.
Career: Manager; computer software company. His wife is a 36 year old housewife.

14) Kempes
Age: 42 years old.
No. of children: Two. A 1 year old son and 4 year old daughter.
Career: Biology teacher in a primary school. Wife is a beauty care teacher.

15) Pascal
Age: 42 years old.
No. of children: Two. A 2 year old boy and a 4 year old girl.
Career: Trained as a nurse but currently does not practice. He manages family alternative medicine therapy clinic cum conference center.

16) Marlies Prins
Age: 37 years old.
No. of children: Two boys.

17) Irene
Age: 42 years old.
No. of children. Two. A two year old boy and a 4 year old girl.
Career: A clinical psychologist.

18) Desree
Age: 30 years old
No of children: 1. A two year old boy.
Career: Music teacher.