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EDITORIAL

Towards a better understanding of risk-taking: key concepts, dimensions and perspectives

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The current study of risk is dominated by the risk minimisation approach that frames risk and risk-taking as something undesirable that should be avoided as much as possible. However, this approach to risk often fails to consider the broader conditions and motivations of risk-taking and to examine why people expose themselves to danger. In this editorial, I explore two key concepts – voluntary risk-taking and risk behaviour – considering the ways in which they represent opposing views in risk studies. I make the case for a broader approach to 'risk-taking' that addresses the complex tensions between risk-taking and risk aversion in the social, natural and material contexts of everyday life. I examine how risk-taking is characterised by varying degrees of control over decision-making, different mixes of motives, the impact of socio-structural factors, forms of routinisation and habitual risk-taking, how power is involved in risk-taking and how identity is used to challenge experts' views. I discuss the role of stigma in risk-taking and how general societal contexts and organisational cultures influence the risk-taking. While there is increasing research on risk-taking, there is still scope for further publications that will advance our understanding of risk-taking in its social contexts, and in this editorial, I address issues that will form the basis of a forthcoming special issue of *Health, Risk & Society*.

Keywords: voluntary risk-taking; risk behaviour; risk-taking

Introduction

Medical research and practice has significantly improved human health over centuries. Giving birth in most modern industrialised societies has changed from an event in which there was a high probability of an adverse outcome, death of the mother and/or her baby to one in which serious harm is unlikely. Some infectious diseases such as small pox have been successfully eradicated through global vaccination campaigns. Citizens now have access to knowledge on how to stay healthy through healthy eating and exercising. Given all these improvements in health status and knowledge, it seems paradoxical that many individuals take risks exposing themselves through their actions more or less consciously and voluntarily to danger and harm.

Voluntary risk-taking

Lyng (2005) in *Edgework* and Lupton and Tulloch (2002) in *Risk in everyday life* developed the concept of *voluntary risk-taking*. Lyng argues that *voluntary risk-taking*,

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especially exposing oneself to danger, is a form of *edgework* contrasting the motivation of the risk-taking activities of people engaging in high-risk leisure activities with the orthodoxy of risk avoidance in interdisciplinary and social science risk research. He argues that people take risks voluntarily; the risk-taking is an end itself not a means to an end. Such risk-takers engage in 'edgework' to challenge themselves and master risks. At the core of the edgework experience are the 'skilful practices and powerful sensations that-risk-takers value so highly' (Lyng, 2005, p. 4). He observes that those engaged in edgework try to get as close as possible to the boundaries between life and death without crossing it. They are not reckless but rather aim to push boundaries of what is possible. They do everything to be successful and have faith in their own ability and skill to master the self-imposed challenges.

Lyng argues that people who are 'crowding the edge' come from all walks of life; therefore, the socio-structural factors are no good variables to explain people's motivation to engage in edgework. Instead, they share the particular desire to challenge themselves through activities such as BASE jumping, big wave surfing, waterfall kayaking, extreme skiing or free climbing (Lyng, 2005, p. 4).

For Lyng (2005), the person who is doing edgework is an *expert*. People engaging in edgework are not reckless but rather 'control freaks' that are well aware of the risks they are taking. They often assume having particular skills which allow them to challenge the edge usually in a carefully planned exercise for example when BASE jumpers prepare for a jump from a building or an athlete prepares for a free climbing exercise.

People doing edgework often question 'official' expertise, seeking to show that they are able to challenge the odds with their own skills. They want to establish the do-ability of the seemingly impossible, such as walking to the North Pole. Lyng claims that in high-income countries an increasing number of people engage in edgework attracted to the danger, thrill and opportunity to experience their 'real self' (Lyng, 2005).

Edgework activities can be distinguished from other activities such as bungee jumping, commercial rafting or white-water kayaking (grade two) where 'voluntary risk-taking' is about overcoming personal anxieties rather than being on the dangerous edge. These activities usually take place under expert guidance and do not require the high level of skills as necessary for edgework. The risks are highly controlled and do not expose participants to substantial threats.

While not all voluntary risk-taking is edgework, it is as Tulloch and Lupton (2003) and Parker and Stanworth (2005) note not uncommon in everyday life. Tulloch and Lupton (2003) define voluntary risk-taking as an:

> activity in which individuals engage is perceived by them to be in some sense risky, but is undertaken deliberately and from choice. This might be contrasted, for example, with taking part in activities that to the dominant culture are coded as 'risky' but are not perceived as such by those involved. Or by participating in activities which are perceived by participants to be unacceptably risky, but because of their circumstances they have little choice of avoiding, or of which they are unaware at the time of risk-taking. (pp. 10–11)

Tulloch and Lupton (2003) do not see voluntary risk-takers as experts or as individuals who know the full extent of the risk they are taking but argue that for their risk-taking to be categorised as voluntary they must have an understanding that they are taking a risk and that there is the possibility of an adverse outcome. For Tulloch and Lupton (2003) voluntary risk-taking requires a self-reflexive decision. As Parker and Stanworth (2005) note that such decisions are usually decisions made under conditions of uncertainty. The

extent of uncertainty in most such decision-making is greater than that in edgework where the danger is all too evident. However, the potential adverse outcomes are often less severe, falling short of death or serious injury that is the outcome of failed edgework. Parker and Stanworth (2005) emphasise the mundane character of much voluntary risk-taking arguing that any decision-making involves risk-taking activity. However in everyday life the concept of risk is only invoked when the envisaged adverse outcome is serious. Individuals may talk about the possibility of catching a cold when going outside in the rain but generally do not categorise this in terms of risk, the consequences of catching a cold are usually small (Hamilton, Adolphs, & Nerlich, 2007, p. 165).

Researchers such as Lightfoot (1997) who examine young persons' voluntary risk-taking emphasise the importance of risk-taking as part of the process of growing up and developing an adult identity. The risk-taking activity itself makes a difference for the risk-taker and the significant others. Voluntary risk-taking makes a statement about risk-taker's life. Risk-taking activities form part of the individual's personal narrative in a way provides a sense of shared history and identity with significant others (Lightfoot, 1997, p. 99f., 107, 129f.). However, Tulloch and Lupton (2003) and Lyng's (2005) findings indicate that in later life risk-taking is valued for similar reasons. People sometimes enthusiastically celebrate voluntary risk-taking as the 'spice in their life'. As Lupton and Tulloch (2002) programmatically titled one of their articles on voluntary risk-taking, 'Life would be pretty dull without risk' a quote from one of their research interviews.

In summary, sociologists analysing *voluntary risk-taking* emphasise the ways in which risk-takers consciously, deliberately and reflexively take a risk. They are not arguing that risk-takers have complete knowledge and certainty about the nature of the risks they are taking. They acknowledge that certainty is rare in both expert and laypeople's risk judgements. However, they are asserting that voluntary risk-takers are aware of taking a risk and the possibility of an adverse outcome.

Sociologists researching *voluntary risk-taking* note that the risk-taking activity is valued in and for itself as a means of developing the risk-taker's identity, give meaning and agency to their life and to provide their life with a focus or direction. Such positive framing is evident even when the risk-taking is linked to illicit activities such as crime or drug addiction. In this context, it can be seen as an activity that helps individuals who are marginalised to retrieve or maintain personal agency and create and maintain an identity and position in a social group albeit a group which may be disadvantaged and abused (see Batchelor, 2007).

Risk behaviour

The sociologists have tended to emphasise that risk-taking is a form of social action that involves individuals in consciously facing challenges and making decisions, and such actions are positively valued and contribute to development of social identify. In contrast, psychologists have focused on the risk behaviour. They have tended to focus on the negative aspect of risk behaviour, the harm for the individual and others that results when individuals fail to effectively assess risk. Thus, psychologists have tended to adopt the role of experts judging risk behaviour and exploring ways in which individuals' responses to risks that are 'out there', created by their natural or social environments, can be improved. The differences between researchers focusing on risk-taking and risk behaviour are summarised in Table 1.

Researchers taking the risk behaviour approach position themselves as experts who identify the factors that influence risk behaviour. They define, determine and analyse

Table 1. Risk behaviour versus voluntary risk-taking.

	Base concept	Reflectivity	Sources	Perspective	Valuation
Voluntary risk-taking	Action	Conscious	Identity	Individual	Positive
Risk behaviour	Behaviour	Unclear	Social/natural context	Expert	Negative

specific risks and focus is the particular conditions that shape risk behaviour and result in objectively measureable outcomes. For example, risk behaviour researchers have examined the factors that contribute to road traffic accidents fatalities, such as whether the size of the car influences risk-taking (Wasielewski & Evans, 1985) or whether compulsory seat belt increases risky driving and resulting in accidents and fatalities, or reduces them (Evans, 1987; Lund & Zador, 1984). Since these researchers tend to focus on harmful outcomes, the nature of risk-taking activity is implied by such outcomes rather than directly observed as they do not consider it important to know about the motives or concrete subjective meaning that drives risk-taking activities. These researchers are not interested in whether risk-takers engage voluntarily or not in risk-taking and whether they are reflexively aware of the risks they take or not. Their focus is on factors that change the outcomes as in the study of fatalities in traffic related to time of the week (Schwing & Kamerud, 1988). The actual risk-taking is implicit in the outcomes. It is not directly observed as a meaningful act.

A good example of this approach is Gigerenzer's (2006) study of the responses of Americans to the terror attack of 11 September 2001. In a detailed analysis of the statistics of fatal road accidents, he was able to show that after the terror attack a substantial number of people changed from long-distance travel by planes to cars, and this change in behaviour contributed to the increase in fatal accidents as the air travel is safer than the car travel. As a result, 1595 more people than usual were killed on the road in the 12 months after the attacks in comparison with the 256 people who died as passengers of the planes involved in the attacks (Gigerenzer, 2006, p. 350). He drew attention to the secondary damage the 9/11 attack in which the responses to the attack were based on emotion rather than rational calculations of relative risks.

Researchers who focus on risky behaviour tend to privilege scientific knowledge based on statistics and probability calculations derived from large population studies that identify potentially harmful and therefore irrational forms of behaviour. Such analysts tend to focus on the level of socio-structural variables and generalised models of action and motivation or attitudes. Their prescriptions for improving the rationality of risk behaviour tend to fail because they do not take account of the socio-cultural contexts and dynamics of risk-taking (Trimpop, 1994).

This approach to risk underpins an important area of public policy, the use of *nudge*, specific behavioural incentives to improve the rationality and outcomes of decisions (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). This approach has been used to 'nudge' individuals towards healthier behaviours such as exercising, eating more vegetables and fruits, drinking less alcohol and giving up smoking. For example, fear-appeal campaigns against smoking have been relatively effective though commentators are critical of the accompanying stigmatisation of 'hard-core' smokers and emphasise the need for more complex interventions and flexible interventions (see for example French, 2011; Thompson, Barnett, & Pearce, 2009). This approach to behavioural change is also evident in recent articles on risk-taking in *Risk Analysis*, for example, the article that examines the influence of

opportunity structures on risk-taking attitudes of prisoners and ex-prisoners (Gummerum, Hanoch, & Rolison, 2014; Rolison, Hanoch, & Gummerum, 2013).

This approach also underpins research that considers individual perceptions and how these perceptions are influenced by observed behaviours of others. For example, Wiedermann, Niggli, and Frick (2014) identify a 'Lemming effect' among the music festival participants in which individuals' observations that 'risky behaviour' such as taking psychoactive substances is normal and accepted and reduces their perception of harmfulness of such substances.

In summary, *risk behaviour* frames risk-taking as irrational and something to be avoided. Such judgements are based on experts' assessment, not on the risk-taker assessment; therefore, it is not clear whether such risky behaviour is considered risky by those engaged in it or whether they are conscious that they are making an explicit decision to engage in risky behaviour.

The distinction between the ideal types of *voluntary risk-taking* and *risky behaviour* is helpful in clarifying the nature of risky activities. However, this polarisation between the study of risk-taking which focuses on individual agency and the benefits derived from the experience of successful risk-taking, and the study of risk behaviour that explores the structural factors that shape objective harmful outcomes, needs to be overcome. Researchers have to make their own position on risk clearer and in particular focus on the process of decision-making, including who is responsible for the risk and who holds authoritative knowledge about risk. While risk-taking is shaped by context in which risks are identified and need to be managed, individuals can respond to same socio-structural and natural/material context in different ways. Thus, researchers need to refocus on the social processes underpinning the risk domain, in particular how risks are negotiated and conflicts resolved and how risk-taking contributes to identity work as a lifelong biographical process (see Table 2). This remains a complex process through which social contexts influence individual activities, while individuals shape and challenge their contexts through their activities and risk-taking. This is a ground where cultural and institutional expectations meet individual desires and lived realities. How they combine is open to debate. It is already clear that this is not necessarily a smooth process, but rather characterised by negotiation, conflicts and the shaping and reshaping of identities.

Table 2. The risk-taking domain: negotiations, conflicts, identity work.

	Base concept	Reflectivity	Sources	Perspective	Valuation
Voluntary risk-taking	Action	Conscious	Identity	Individual	Positive
Risk-taking	Negotiations / Conflicts / Identity Work				
Risk behaviour	Behaviour	Unclear	Social/Natural context	Expert	Negative

Exploring the risk-taking domain

By focusing on the *risk-taking domain*, researchers can examine the extent to which risk-taking is a well-informed reflexive activity or the result of everyday routines that are based on habit rather than explicit evaluation of risk information. Such an approach would enable researchers examine the ways in which individuals can effectively manage risk by acknowledging and engaging with the social roots of risk-taking and intrinsic nature of risk in linking individual, society and their environment. Taking this approach, researchers can examine how issues of power and identity which are deeply embedded in social structures, social institutions and organisations and/or in ongoing interactive negotiation in everyday life inform risk-related activities. Furthermore, it will enable them to explore whether risk-taking is an important social activity in its own right or part of or a side effect of identity work, economic exploitation, institutional individualism, economic or cultural globalisation processes.

In the remainder of this section, I will identify possible components of the domain of risk-taking identifying specific issues where further publications in, for example, a forthcoming special issue of *Health, Risk & Society* would contribute to our understanding of this domain.

Control in risk-taking

Given the work that has already been undertaken the ideal-type notion of voluntary risk-taking and edgework, it is an obvious starting point. Lyng (1990) introduced the edgework approach as a critique of the risk avoidance and reduction paradigm. He argues that people engage in edgework voluntarily and go 'to their limits'/'to the edge' without crossing it. This is an important insight. Individuals engaging in edgework are usually not reckless but rather 'control freaks'. Though they are aware of the possibility of death or significant injury, they trust themselves to avoid such outcomes; they feel in control. Thus, edgework sharply contrasts with games of luck where outcomes are determined by chance. Lyng (1990, p. 871f.) notes that it is this sense of control and personal agency that attracts individuals with different backgrounds to this type of risk-taking, and it is this that they share when doing edgework.

However, if we consider edgework in terms of the risk-taking domain, then both the assumptions that the edge worker seeks and is in control and that the social background and class of the edge worker are irrelevant need to be reconsidered. In his early work, Goffman (1967) noted that individuals are attracted to 'where the action is' (p. 149). He describes the attractiveness of different kinds of *chance taking* behaviour that provide an escape of everyday routines and opportunities for individuals to show qualities they have usually little opportunity to display under normal conditions.[1] Thus, Goffman provides a more comprehensive understanding of *chance taking*, which of course includes edgework. Goffman argues that individuals not only take risks with the expectation of being in control, but also take risks without being in control as in games of luck where failure is a part of risk-taking. Exploring limits is common among young individuals in high-income countries and includes also the ability to interpret failure as an opportunity to gain experience (Lightfoot, 1997) and to interpret the loss of control as something positive (Zinn, 2004, 2005), though there is a caveat that the failure should not be too serious or have too serious consequences.

The motives for risk-taking

Edgework focuses on a narrow part of the motivational domain of risk-taking; the desire and thrill provided by the risk-taking activity itself. Researchers have shown that people more often engage in risk-taking for less self-oriented reasons and their motivation is often rather complex. In her study on aid work, Roth (2015) found that people take part in it for a number of different reasons such as the desire to 'travel to foreign places' and 'to do something worthwhile' and that the social gains such as the 'camaraderie' (p. 7) are important. He noted that altruism is an important reason why individuals are willing to take the risks; they want to do something that actually 'makes a difference' to people and feel that through their work they received much more than they gave (p. 9). Roth (2015) argues that aid-worker have three major strategies to cope with the reality of increasingly unpredictable conditions when working in the field: downplaying the risks by noting that living is intrinsically dangerous; carefully managing their exposure to risks they would 'find scary at home'; using their 'privileged position' as an international aid-worker to control risk (p. 12). There were some workers who took a fatalistic approach to risk arguing they had no agency. These workers' pointed out that their fate was predetermined; thus, there was no need to avoid potentially dangerous situations' (p. 12). In her study, Roth showed that the participants were aware of the risks but were willing to tolerate or manage them as they wanted to make a contribution to improving human well-being and valued the ways in which this contributed to their self-esteem and social esteem.

While Lyng's edgework focuses on risk-taking as an end in itself, Roth's analysis places risk-taking as a means to an end. In her study, it was essentially voluntary; challenge individuals were willing to meet. However, this raises the issues of how voluntary risk is when individuals are faced with a dilemma and have to make a choice between several risky options without having full knowledge or control about the outcomes (Hayenhjelm, 2006). An example would be Wallman's (2001) study on migrant sex workers who have to deal with many pressures and risks; some are within but many are outside their control, ranging from the need to support a financially dependent family in their country of origin, the threat to them and their family if they should try to escape their pimp, or the decision not to use a condom for extra income (p. 83). Framing such risk-taking as voluntary seems ideological and tends to imply individual responsibility for a high-risk journey where the outcomes are rarely under individual control.

There are less extreme situations in which individuals are forced to make choices. Individuals who have a life-threatening illness often have little choice other than to take a risk and to hope that the respective treatment will work and that a doctor will do a good job or a hospital will provide good treatment. Since the patient often does not have the knowledge or resources to develop a sense of control over the risk, they have to rely on some form of faith; trust (Brown & Calnan, 2012), hope or prayer (Zinn, 2008).

If we adopt Goffman's broader concept of chance taking, then we can explore the ways in which variations in degree of control and knowledge about the outcomes influence the process of risk-taking with edgework forming the ideal type of high control and knowledge and the case of individuals who are seriously ill forming the ideal type of low control and knowledge.

Socio-structural factors in risk-taking

Although Lyng argues that social background is not relevant to edgework, various researchers have pointed out that white middle-class men are the main participants in

the activities he cites as typical of edgework (Miller, 1991). There is evidence that gender influences the experience and the choice of different types of edgework (Hannah-Moffat & O'Malley, 2007; Lois, 2001, 2005; Newmahr, 2011; Olstead, 2011), and there might also be differences in relation to social class (Canaan, 1996).

Since Lyng focuses on the thrills of edgework, he does not explore the ways in which it can be used to compensate for social disadvantage. Batchelor (2007) studied Scottish young women aged 16 to 24 years who had been convicted of violent offences. She found that their risk-taking was a way of regaining control of a life which was out of control. These women had experienced family problems and abuse. Batchelor (2007) argued that they used risk-taking to 'achieve a semblance of control' (p. 205) and risk-taking provided them with a sense of agency. Engaging in crime and drug use, they were unable to construct a meaningful future and lived very much in the present, focusing on the next hit. For these young women, 'risk seeking' was 'a way to make you feel' and reminded young women that they were 'alive' and an illicit risk-taking 'was a vital survival strategy' (Batchelor, 2007).

Routinisation of risk-taking

Routines are powerful ways of reproducing social structures (Giddens, 1984) since they are grounded in preconscious patterns of behaviour which are only scrutinised when there is some form of crisis. However, there are differences in the ways how risk-taking routines are embedded in the social and to what degree they are reflexively available.

Becker (1953, 1973) in his study of how individuals learn to smoke marijuana showed that risk-taking routines have to be actively appropriated. Furthermore, Rhodes (1997, p. 220ff.) found in his study on illicit drug users that the experience of risk and risk-taking changes with practice. For individuals who do not inject or have just started to inject drugs, injecting is categorised as a high-risk dangerous activity, but for those who routinely inject the risk shift from the injecting itself to challenges to injecting such as vein damage.

The routinisation of risk-taking is a key issue in disaster studies where the routinisation and normalisation of 'deviant' risk-taking had been identified as the central factor in major disasters (Turner, 1978; Turner & Pidgeon, 1997; Carson, 1982) such as the challenger launch disasters (Vaughan, 1996). Organisations face the challenge of deviant risk-taking and prevent it while facilitating positive risk-taking that enables the organisation to manage everyday risk and uncertainty.

The routines of everyday life enable individuals to effectively 'bracket out' risk such as those with buying, preparing and eating food. Green, Draper, and Dowler (2003) undertook a study on food choice in the UK relatively shortly after the 'Mad Cow Disease' (BSE, Bovine spongiform encephalopathy) crisis and found that anxieties about food safety had not disrupted established routines. Consumer concerns about eating beef were displaced by their generalised trust in expert systems of good control and British food production. In this way, doubts had been silenced by trust and routines. Green et al. (2003) found evidence that nationalist discourses accusing the European Union of unfair boycott of British beef and exaggeration of the dangers of eating British beef were mobilised to silence a risk discourse for food decisions.

Such research suggests that major events or crises can disrupt routines and trigger short-term behavioural changes, but routines are resilient and can quickly re-establish themselves if the behaviour is not categorised as a form of risk-taking.[2]

Habitual risk-taking

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, socially engrained predispositions and values provides a way of linking risk-taking with the deeper reproduction of social structure through habitual risk-taking. Such risk-taking may have conscious and unconscious elements and be linked to particular identities and institutionally embedded power structures. There is evidence that in certain 'risky' occupations individuals engage in habitual risk-taking (see for example Desmond, 2007). While individuals who have a personal preference for taking such risks may be drawn to the occupation, for example an individuals who becomes a wild firefighter may see this as a personal preference, Desmond (2007) has argued such choice might be preframed; for example, a boy growing up in a country area is likely to absorb the rural habitus in which men prove their skills and masculinity by dealing with the challenges of natural environment such a forest fires. In Zinn's (2010) study of ex-soldiers those interviewed stated that becoming a soldier was not really a choice but something what seems 'natural' or 'normal' for working-class men (pp. 19–24). Gjernes's (2008) study on Sámi women involved in reindeer herding in Northern Norway shows how health risks, economic risks of working in reindeer herding and the cultural risks of this traditional business are interwoven in the ways how health risks are understood, accepted and responded to. Expert health advice is not ignored or distrusted but tailored to their world views shaped by cultural, material and natural living conditions.

In all these examples, it is not clear to what extent people when making decisions are aware of the risks they take. People might just accept a degree of danger as normal part of their life supported by their milieu-specific experience. When risk behaviour or risk-taking is linked to milieu-specific experiences, they might be particularly difficult to change since they are supported by socio-structural conditions of a way of life and a related social identity. In such cases, as Brown (2012) has argued, changing the short-term 'choice architecture' as suggested by approaches building on 'nudge' will fail since individual's engagement in and exposure to risk are reinforced by the everyday conditions of life as well as attitudes developed through lifelong experiences.

Power in risk-taking

The reproduction of social structures is based on deeply engrained *power inequalities*. As I have already noted, individuals may engage in edgework when they are marginalised and socially disadvantaged to regain (a sense of) agency (Batchelor, 2007). Some workers are regularly involved in decision-making where risk-taking is an alternative to a highly probable loss. For example, Heimer (1988) commented on a study of the practices in the British offshore oil industry (Carson, 1982) that:

> the quick decision to accept an especially dangerous task is motivated by a desire to avoid a certain loss (being fired or punished). Workers choose to gamble rather than to accept certain losses. (Heimer, 1988, p. 504)

Carson (1982) study is an excellent analysis of the ways in which the power dynamics inherent in employment relations and related psychological mechanisms lead to workers take risks in the behalf of their employer.

Similarly Whittaker and Hart (1996) analysed the ways in which female indoor sex workers managed risk by developing safe practices supported by their 'maids'. They found that sex workers' exposure to risk was dependent on their 'maids' power.

Powerful maids took away the women's autonomy and increased the amount of risk they had to take.

Such examples show how power can work more indirectly or directly affecting people who are in a weak and dependent situation and affecting the risks they have to take or expose themselves to.

Identity shapes risk-taking at work

An individual's identity can play a key role in their risk-taking patterns. For example, Fynbo and Jörvinen's (2011) study on convicted drink-drivers showed how risk-taking can be shaped by a particular occupational identity. Some of the Danish carpenters they interviewed linked their risk-taking to their occupational identity. These individuals justified drink-driving as part of their carpenter identity (Fynbo & Jörvinen, 2011).

For many individuals, work is at the centre of their life and 'doing a good job' supports feelings of self-worth and identity. For example, professionals working in Canadian nonprofit social service organisations internalise the organisations' helping culture and consider doing an exceptional good job while exposing themselves to risk (Kosny & Eaking, 2008). In a Swedish study, railway maintenance workers refer to general norm of punctuality of train services when justifying ignoring safety procedures (Sanne, 2008). These professionals are not reckless, they rather use their skills to gain and maintain a desired professional identity. However, organisations can exploit this behaviour for their own advantage and might press employees to take even greater risks as we have seen in the earlier examples of the British offshore oil industry and sex workers.

The difficult tensions between individual preparedness to take risks for a desired identity and an organisational or institutional culture that encourages employees to engage in activities on their own risk have also been found in social work. Work on Australian and British health and welfare professionals (see Kemshall, Parton, Walsh, & Waterson, 1997; Sawyer, Green, Moran, & Brett, 2009) indicates that regulations set up to protect an agency might encourage professionals to take risks when regulations contradict their professional judgement. This issue has been highlighted by Sawyer et al. (2009) in *Should the Nurse Change the Light Globe [Bulb]?* They argued that community nurses engage in individual risk balancing exercises which might put them at risk when 'changing the light globe (bulb)' disregarding safety guidelines.

Identity challenges expert views

There is a growing body of research on the difference between expert views on risk-taking and those of risk-takers for whom identity work may be important and risk and risk-taking may be at the centre or the periphery of individuals' identity.

For example, Harries (2008) argued the reasons why some people in flood risk areas in England do not protect their home against flooding could only be understood considering how such measures threaten these people's ontological security. Referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs he argues that:

> the rejection of flood-risk mitigation measures, and indeed of the whole discourse of flood-risk mitigation, occurs, … because [these measures] are perceived as endangering other needs that are immediate and pressing. (p. 480)

Harries argues that householders' sense of security depends on three fundamental social assumptions that *a home is safe, society efficiently protects its citizens* against floods and *nature is in general benign*. Only a number of first-hand flooding experiences create doubts in the householders' mind and produce the conditions in which these assumptions are held to be no longer tenable. Under these circumstances, some householders are willing to stop risk-taking and adopt safety measures. However, other householders despite the experience of flood continue to take the risk of flood damage as they see the protective measures as more threatening in terms of loss of ontological security and homeliness of their house (Harries, 2008, p. 487).

Resistance to childhood vaccination can also be linked to identity issues. Vaccination resistance has become quite a serious issue since it endangered herd immunity and therefore generated new risks for even more people. It is puzzling that at a time there are more and have better vaccines, parental resistance to vaccination is growing and unnecessary additional risks are caused by individual risk-taking.

Hobson-West (2003, p. 275) argued in her study on resistance to childhood vaccination in the UK that there is a systematic contradiction between the trends in our de-traditionalised societies to focus on lifestyle and individual action and the need of mass vaccination necessary to secure herd immunity. She suggests that in today's individualised societies mass vaccination looks like an anomaly that contradicts fundamental social values (p. 277). The individualised identities in today's postmodern societies would come with a general lack of trust in social institutions and suspicion against centralised vaccination programmes (p. 280).

Furthermore, individualised societies are characterised by a growing diversity of different world views and not all of them follow a rather 'static' model of health and disease defining health primarily as the absence of disease and disease as the result of an attack from outside that the immune system attempts to ward off. In contrast, other understandings of health and illness such as provided by homeopathy conceptualise health holistically focusing on strengthening individual's vital forces more generally (Hobson-West, 2003, p. 278).

Stigma and risk-taking

At times where the negative effects of smoking and drinking to the unborn life are well known, it is still surprising that many women combine harmful behaviour and pregnancy despite of strong normative discourses that condemn such behaviour. Against the orthodoxy of risk communication, many qualitative studies have shown that women are aware and knowledgeable of the health risks of smoking and drinking during pregnancy (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2014, p. 531). However, smoking during pregnancy is broadly stigmatised in most Western countries, while moderate drinking is considered acceptable (Hammer & Inglin, 2014, p. 24). Even when a national policy follows a precautionary approach of zero risk – no smoking or alcohol – there is good qualitative evidence that women make their own decisions and deal with the available information and normative discourses to fit their life situation, learned behaviour and identity.

Wigginton and Lafrance (2014) argued that women justified their smoking as a coping strategy to deal with everyday life challenges. They establish discursive strategies to justify continuing their learned behaviour during pregnancy rather than quitting smoking. In Wigginton and Lafrance (2014) study, women mobilised personal experiences against the probabilistic knowledge of medicine to challenge medical knowledge, to raise doubts and emphasise uncertainty of expert knowledge deflecting moral threats to their identity.

They presented health as a lottery and good and bad health as being a 'lottery draw' (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2014, p. 542). The women in the study effectively redefined risk emphasising their own levels of stress so that if they stopped smoking this could harm their babies. Many women claimed that their reducing smoking approach has been supported by health professionals (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2014, p. 543) and redefine it as 'smoking for health' thereby protecting their identity against morel threats (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2014, pp. 543–544).

Hammer and Inglin (2014) in their study on pregnant women in Switzerland examined different social attitudes towards smoking and drinking during pregnancy. Smoking was widely seen as irresponsible risk-taking, while moderate drinking was rather considered a low-risk lifestyle choice and embedded in everyday culture (for example having a glass of wine with dinner). In both cases, women present themselves as responsible risk-takers that make knowledgeable decisions under uncertainty and even mobilise professional support for their approach of reduced smoking or occasional drinking. There is no need for the middle-class women to justify moderate drinking against strong moral discourses as in the case of smoking that triggered diverse discursive strategies to deal with stigma of behaving irresponsibly.

The situation was more challenging for women who were already stigmatised because of their risk behaviour. The pregnant women in Stengel's (2014) study in Canada showed how their risk identity as drug users and associated treatment and close supervision (such as regular drug tests) became part of their personal risk management strategy. In practice, many women were concerned about reporting health issues to social services because of their status as (former) drug user and the worries that their child would be taken from them after birth. As a result, they tend not to ask for support during and after pregnancy when they have health issues such as post-partum depression (Stengel, 2014, p. 45). Stengel (2014) suggests that a less stigmatising practice could reduce such secondary risks and well-being of the women and thereby better outcomes altogether.

General societal contexts and individual risk-taking in organisations

There is evidence that general societal contexts such as political or economic pressure shape organisational work conditions and feed into individual risk-taking. In the case of the Challenger launch decision, Vaughan (1996) argued that the general preparedness to accept higher risks resulted from the political and economic pressure on The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to be successful with lower resources. The financial pressure on NASA has supported a practice that tended to accept higher risks to deliver the desired success stories.

Research on workers on British oil rigs in the Northern Sea (Carson, 1982) and the US construction workers has shown that workers are well aware of the general economic climate or personal pressure to do a good job and help an organisation to save money to remain competitive might support the preparedness to take risks for job security. Studies such as by Lopez (2007) on practices in a nursing home show that tough regulations to secure better quality of a service may lead to the development of unofficial practices that do not conform to those prescribed by official rules resulting in 'two universes' which run parallel. Such a regulatory practice supports the development and normalisation of deviant risk-taking practices (Lopez, 2007) outside the supervision and control.

Conclusion

In this editorial, I have reviewed current research to help develop conceptual understanding of risk-taking. This seems timely in a context where some branches of risk research have a strong bias towards a risk minimisation perspective based on the identification of risky behaviour. I argue for seeing *risky behaviour* and *risk-taking* as two sides of the modern world view. Building on this approach, I identify the importance for conceptual provision and note that *voluntary risk-taking* and *risk behaviour* as two contrasting ideal types. In practice, both ideal types have been criticised, voluntary risk-taking for its tendency to neglect systematic socio-structural conditions and risk behaviour for neglecting the motivational and subjective elements of risk-taking. However, instead of engaging in a lengthy discussion of the critique of the two approaches, I have examined the *risk-taking domain* in between the ideal types.

I have shown that risk-taking can be the product of different motivations ranging from the intrinsic value of the risk-taking activity itself as in edgework, through expected social recognition as a risk-taker, to risk-taking as a means of achieving other valued outcomes. Therefore, it is important to see risk-taking as part of an interactive process or the social world more generally. Risk-taking is not restricted to the desire to be in control. People also engage in games of luck when taking risk or accepting their lack of control when taking risks they value for other reasons.

Socio-structural factors are important. Risk-taking may be supported by a deeply socially rooted habitus and social power structures that urge people to take risks. Risk-taking might become routinised that changes the nature of risk-taking as well as the focus of risk-taking. Both routinised and habitual risk-taking make the boundaries of risk-taking blurry as risk is a side effect of an activity, not its central concern.

Identity and the process of negotiating identity are central to risk-taking in many ways. People can take risks for a valued identity or their identity can conflict with institutional or organisational expectations. Expert attempts to change risk-taking often fail as they do not engage with people's identities, the social rooting of risk-taking and social power structures. Global and long-term social changes also influence often mediated through organisations individual risk-taking. For example, people take risks at work in response to perceived general market competition or might reject centralised risk management strategies when affected by an individualised societal culture.

Even though there is growing knowledge about the various dimensions influencing risk-taking, a lot more evidence is needed to advance our understanding of the everyday life practices of balancing risk aversion and risk-taking. For example, how individual desire to take risks and organisational risk-taking cultures combine, to what extent individual risk-taking and organisational risk aversion might conflict or under which conditions official risk regulation is undermined by a generally accepted or parallel risk-taking culture. It is also an open question to what extent different social services have established practices that encourage customers to take undesired risk. Furthermore, it is still an open question how individual risk-taking, which is deeply rooted in the structures of the social realm, can be efficiently changed when reproduced by powerful social forces. When we accept that risk-taking can be an important and powerful social resource for supporting social processes, it is an important question which conditions enable, support and nourish risk-taking. Finally, debates about risk-taking are informed by normative discourses and social power structures which influence which risk-taking is acceptable, who can take risks without being made responsible for possible negative outcomes and who might be made responsible for risks not taken.

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Notes

1. An interesting example is war which gives ordinary man the opportunity to show character as illustrated by Chris Hedges' (2002) outstanding book on *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*.
2. There are two good reasons why people resist ongoing reflections about food security in favour of trust or hope. Food scandals in the UK are relatively rare and standards are high. Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows that secure food is a basic level and important for providing ontological security. People might not easily give up on this feeling of security (compare the argument of Harries (2008) why some people resist to protect themselves against floods).

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