

The Social Construction of Risk by Young People: Linking Risk Theory and Practice

Dr Liz Austen

**Senior Lecturer in Criminology
Faculty of Development and Society, Sheffield Hallam
University**

Information in the presentation should be credited to: Austen (forthcoming 2009) The Social Construction of Risk by Young People, *Health Risk and Society*.



Overview

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Introduction to the theory

- concept of risk has become a central characteristic of contemporary society and the writing on high/late modernity ('risk-chic' environment Austen 2009)
- 'risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with the hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself' (Beck 1992: 21)
- as the dominance of risk discourses specific to science and technology (as Beck begins) filter into the public domain (predominantly via the media, Furedi 1997) the preoccupation with the concept widens.
- such a preoccupation now stretches in breadth to include associated concepts (hazard, fear, harm, uncertainty; concepts used now interchangeably, Chadee, Austen, Ditton 2006) and diversifies into most areas of social life (living at risk + risk taking)

Epistemological/ontological approach

- Postmodern epistemology – small samples, lived experiences, hidden voices, deconstruction of language
- Beck's realist position would seem to place risks and hazards at odds with subjective feelings of anxiety and fear, a contradiction, noted by Beck himself, (Flynn 2006).
- alternative risk theorists, such as Mary Douglas et al (1966, 1980, 1992) promote the appreciation of socially constructed risk agendas.
- furthermore, there are those who suggest that the separation of actual (objective) and appraised (subjective/perceived) risk is 'illusionary' (Chadee, Austen, Ditton 2006).



Introduction to the data

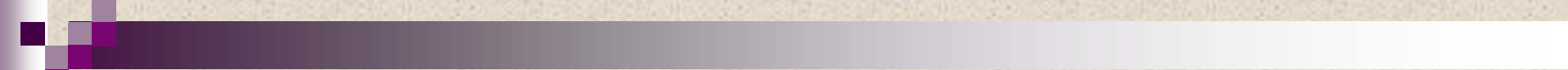
- doctoral research
- school based study in the north of England
- questionnaires (n=151) and focus groups (n=45) for school attending students aged 13 to 18 (focus groups 14-16) during 2003/2004
- school in question sampled by convenience

Introduction to the data

- (...) is situated in the former coalfield area of [county] and has a mixture of urban areas, villages and open country. Historically (...)’s economy was dominated by the area’s steel works and coal mines but since the early 1980’s twelve of the thirteen coal mines have closed. This has resulted in significant economic, social and environmental decline (Audit 2001:7).
- relative deprivation: the Ward in which the school resides ranked 2,614 out of 8,414 English Wards.
- in 2001 37% of those aged 16-74 in this Ward had no qualifications, whereas only 12% were qualified to degree level or higher.
- in 2000 only 1.2% of the Ward population were of ethnic minority origin.

Linking the theory and the data

- in recent years scholars have become critical of the dominance and use of the RS thesis (Mythen & Walklate 2006) and ultimately the supposition that it encapsulates the sentiments and experiences of all
- the criticism often levelled at Beck and other social theorists writing on the subject of risk, is that such theorising lacks empirical evidence (Dingwall 1999, Burgess 2006, Jenkins 2006).
- a number of studies have begun to comment on other areas of the RS thesis (see Pilkington 2007 with reference to ‘individualisation’).
- negativity, worry, uncertainty and scepticism are areas which have been relatively under investigated in relation to young people
- focusing on ‘everyday risk taking’ (see Parker *et al.* 1998, Lupton 1999, Luton and Tulloch 2002, Lee's 2007) rather than ‘drug decisions’ (see Pilkington 2007)



Critique: risk is a negative concept

- ‘one is no longer concerned with attaining something good, but rather with preventing the worst (Beck 1992: 49).
- ‘threat of self-annihilation’ (Wilkinson 1997: 3).
- ‘its doom-laden view’ (Adams 1995: 182)
- ‘double edged character of society’ (Giddens 1990: 7)

Critique: risk is a negative concept

Findings

Examples of risks taken


- 'Sports and Leisure' (17.8%), 'Health' (13.3%), 'Stunts and Play' (12.6%)

Appealing against the negative label

- these additional comments were predominantly twofold:-
 - justified or defended their actions (it wasn't really risky, I was supervised, he deserved it, I didn't do it),
 - renounced their actions showing risk aversion (it was an accident, I am not a risk taker)
- note links to Matza (1964, 1990) and Hammersley *et al.* (2001), Jenkins (2006).

Critique: risk is aligned with uncertainty and worry

- “suddenly everything becomes uncertain” (Beck 1992: 109).
- the negativity of the ‘Risk Society’ suggests that society is inherently worried about the proliferation and negotiation of ‘actual’ risks.
- ‘preventing the worst’, is now an accepted part of contemporary society and it follows that we become anxious.
- uncertainty can be understood as the cause of worry, coupled with negative thinking.
- Kasperson et al. (2003) regards the continuation of this situation as the ‘social amplification of risk’



Critique: risk is aligned with uncertainty and worry

Findings

- variation in levels of worry (positively correlated with risk)
- worry not correlated with ‘actual’ risk – support for detailed understanding of the social and cultural processes at work in the creation of risk consciousness.
- overwhelming certainty (inaccurate and correct knowledge show)
- these results contradict the assumption that perceived risk is accompanied by feelings of uncertainty.

Critique: risk is aligned with uncertainty and worry

- lack of reference to the term 'risk' within these focus groups (also found by Pilkington 2007)
- the word 'risk' was not found to be part of the everyday discourse of young people.
- it could be concluded that the sample may discuss feelings of worry and uncertainty or negativity, however do not associate these discussions with the language of 'risk'.

Critique: those living in the 'Risk Society' have become sceptical of expert opinions.

- in a society which is preoccupied with risk, the discourse of risk information creates a considerable challenge for the lay person
- Beck's conclusion to such questioning is a state of anxiety, scepticism of expert opinion, and diminished trust in both professionals and established institutions (1992).
- Giddens (1990: 91) proposes, experts in many fields, (including health and safety policy) continue to fail to control and regulate the possibility of negative outcomes. Due to expert disagreements, resulting in a loss of authority, society begins to question the validity of assessments, a concept Giddens referred to as 'doubt' (1991: 3).

Critique: those living in the 'Risk Society' have become sceptical of expert opinions.

Findings

- vignette responses showed the sample would believe the drug advice provided by a teacher rather than a peer (59.6%)
- 56.7% of those who said they believed the teacher could not be persuaded into believing the contradictory experiences of friends.
- focus groups data revealed that although knowledge gained from school is taken as fact, other factors, including the respectability and superiority of the teacher and the bias of the young people, were also cited as influencing this decision
- these findings again support those of Pilkington that 'young people's drug choices are framed largely within dominant discourses of drug use (they are perceived as 'risky' behaviours with harmful, psychological and social consequences)' (2007: 374).

Linking risk theory and practice

Lessons

- limitations of grand theorising (to specific contexts)
- ‘crime is just one of the risks we take’ – the application to criminal justice practice
- the use of risk discourse in practice settings

Issues

- epistemological concerns - context specific theorising
- lack of ‘evidencing’ of National Drug Policy – do drug/risk researchers add *anything*?
- impact of ‘moral panics’ vs functional risk taking

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