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The Challenge of (Managing) New Risks

Jens O. Zinn and Peter Taylor-Gooby

Research in the field of risk has expanded rapidly in recent years, as Chapter 2 shows. Social science approaches have developed from an initial concern with the management of technical issues, drawing on rational actor models of behaviour, to include psychological and sociological perspectives which seek to capture the complexity of the factors that influence risk responses in different settings, and the ways in which thinking about and managing risk is embedded in social and cultural contexts. In parallel to the expansion in the range of disciplines and methods applied to risk, is an expansion of theoretical interest, embracing more sophisticated accounts of mental modelling, lay/expert interactions, and theories of governmentality and of risk society.

This chapter deals with the most recent work and with the current unresolved debates in risk research. The chief areas of interest stem from three developments, both implicit in the argument developed in the previous chapter.

First there is a widespread recognition that risk issues are endemic in any society that relies on complex enterprises, particularly those involving the onward rush of new and untried technologies. Once this point is understood, there is no possibility of returning to a situation in which risks could be understood as simply technical issues, which could be eliminated if the right systems were put in place. The issue becomes much more one of managing an acceptable level of risk.

This leads to the second point: if risk is understood as, to a great extent, a matter of judgements about acceptability, a whole range of political issues about trust in authorities, experts, and officials, about social communication and the mass media come into play. Once the views of the lay
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public are taken seriously, decision-making can no longer be exclusively a preserve of the authorities, but must include processes of interaction and participation between all those involved.

The third point follows from this and also draws on the much broader range of social science approaches now included in the analysis of risk. Recent work demonstrates the complexity of the risky choices that people make in their everyday lives. Issues of social identity and group membership are bound up with risk-taking and risk-avoidance. Some people actively seek out some risks, which others just as strenuously avoid. It becomes clear that risk cannot be understood simply in terms of rational judgement. Emotional factors supply the drive necessary to make choices and are often implicated in the process of choosing. Equally, anxiety and stress are associated with risk, and contentment with security.

Risk as a theme in social science has spread to embrace a whole range of issues and approaches. Work in this field includes analyses at the macro-level, seeking to understand risk and uncertainty as primary elements in modern culture. It also refers at an intermediate level to the question of how risks are to be managed by institutions and organizations in a publicly acceptable way, and, at the micro-level, to the problem of accounting for the way people respond in complex contexts. One major challenge now lies in finding ways to bring together these levels of understanding. Another results from recognition that individual risk experience develops over time, and methods which capture experience, anticipation, and biography are required.

New challenges for risk research result from globalized risks, such as global warming, BSE, influenza epidemics, and international crime and terrorism, and the need for transnational collaboration to manage them. National differences in risk regimes and cultures and the implications of accounts of society in terms of risk become issues for further research and theorizing.

Endemic Risk

The current discussion of risk is permeated by concerns about 'new' uncertainties which cannot be transformed by rational calculation into manageable risks. With the acceptance that there are, in principle, limits to knowledge and control, the question of how to cope with uncertainty rises up the societal agenda. The 'Challenge of Uncertainty'
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(Zinn 2005a) emerges across many societal domains. At a technical level, it refers to the problem of coping with the limits of scientific knowledge and with the resulting question of which risks we want to take. These political and ethical issues feed into the political principle of precaution. Here and in other non-technical areas of risk, 'objective' rationality and social and subjective rationalities compete with each other in political controversies and processes.

Precaution

With the growing acknowledgement of the social as an important part of risk management, different values and perspectives on risk are introduced into the technical approach on risk. The 'precautionary principle' offered a solution to the problem of coping with the mixture of limited knowledge and ethical doubts with respect to the uncertain impact of technical developments, particularly in the fields of the environment and health.

Adoption of the principle was driven by the desire for the political management of public concerns rather than as a scientific concept. It promised a systematic way of coping with the irreducible uncertainties of decision-making and thereby providing legitimation for policy. It also seeks to reduce errors caused by ignoring 'early warnings' and to develop procedures for promoting greater awareness of the possible side effects of innovations (EEA 2001).

The precautionary principle has emerged as a general rule for decision-making across many areas of policymaking. The EU Treaty of Nice (2000) declares that all areas of EU policymaking should embrace this principle. Despite its wide application, the definition of the principle is imprecise. A scientific and a 'common sense' approach can be distinguished (Burgess 2004: 158).

The scientific approach accepts precaution only on the basis of scientific knowledge and calculation, whereas the common sense approach accepts everyday life knowledge and concerns as reasons for rejecting innovations where there is uncertainty. It opens up the discourse to 'rationally' unfounded rejections. Some authors interpret that as a necessary brake on innovation required by ecologically informed decision-making (Japp 2000). This approach is criticized by those who claim the principle gives too much power to irrational fears. Consumer organizations and the public often react hysterically (Burgess 2004), and prevent necessary scientific and societal development. This perspective argues that a reactionary 'culture of fear' (Furedi 1997, 2002) has to be overcome in order to support
societal (particularly economic) development (Wilsdon and Willis 2004). However, the aspiration that unrestrained innovation will produce the knowledge necessary to solve today's problems (Wildavsky 1988, 1995) also involves risk (Japp 2000).

**Competing Rationalities**

Awareness of the limits of technical risk assessment and management to control uncertainty within the technical paradigm has led to attempts to improve the quality of calculation and assessment. Additionally, the approach attempts to combine objective with social and subjective risk problems. For example, Klinke and Renn (2002) seek to combine precaution and rational assessment as appropriate to specific risk problems. They distinguish ideal types of risks by combining several criteria to generate a typology of six different risk types. Depending on the different characteristics they recommend specific strategies to manage different kinds of risk. *Risk-based management* is suggested for risks where both the probability of occurrence and the extent of damage are relatively well known and can mainly be managed by reducing the catastrophic potential by technical and formal means. *Precaution-based management* is suggested when the risk is connected with a relatively high degree of uncertainty. The first priority of risk management is the application of precautionary measures and the development of substitutes. Finally, *discourse-based management* is appropriate when objective risk knowledge is not used properly, for example, when the potential for wide-ranging damage is ignored (climate change) or harmless effects are perceived as threats (mobile phones).

This approach starts from the identifiable characteristics of a risk problem and provides a systematic strategy for managing new risks and uncertainties (Klinke and Renn 2002: 1082–5, 1090). Limitations emerge when it is difficult to assign a risk to a category in advance. The approach maintains the value of scientific knowledge and implies that on that basis discursive strategies will lead to unambiguous solutions. Some research indicates that this is often an unrealistic expectation (STAGE 2005).

The problem of the limits to the rational management of uncertainty is powerful in other domains as well. For example, in health and illness it is a widely shared norm that uncertainty has to be minimized, particularly regarding the success of treatments (compare Alaszewski, Chapter 8). Formal control structures take responsibility from the individual provided that the rules are followed. However, the success of organizations depends also on informal structures. A doctor who only followed strictly formal
rules might, when faced with an unexpected situation, become a risk. At the same time, health knowledge is becoming increasingly diverse and uncertain, as orthodox medicine is questioned by other knowledge systems, such as homeopathy and acupuncture (Zinn 2005).

In criminology the 'key contention is that the modernist disciplinary agenda delivered through the welfare state has been replaced by a welfare-penal agenda based upon risk' (see Kemshall, Chapter 4). Despite the huge range of actuarial risk techniques that are now applied, the more recent concern in research and theorizing is about the implications and the dark side of risk. Risk calculations are interpreted not only as an objective issue but also as a moral concept interwoven with ideas of responsibility and neglecting diversity (as also in the governmentality approach). Concerns about crime cannot be divorced from decisions about the level of uncertainty or deviance we would like to accept and about which crimes provoke concern.

This tension between freedom, autonomy, and uncertainty is also an issue in the context of family and partnership (compare Lewis and Sarre, Chapter 7). When partnership is open to negotiation and decisions, as the individualization thesis implies, it may become uncertain in terms of continuity, but might become more certain in terms of quality. The controversy in research is about how these uncertainties are to be understood as good or bad and how they have to be handled, as something to be supported or prevented by social policy.

Finally, the idea of regulation and management is increasingly infected by the insight that in some high-risk organizations, it is impossible to achieve absolute control (Vaughan 1996). This leads to interest in the management of such pervasive uncertainties, and also in how management and organization itself produce unforeseen risks and how we can control them (see Hutter, Chapter 10).

The Public Acceptability of Risky Choices

The concern of politicians and other decision-makers about the public acceptability of risky decisions generates support for research on good risk governance (TRUSTNET 1999, 2004; PABE 2002; STAGE 2005). In this context and more generally, the media are seen as a decisive framing mechanism, capable of not only reinforcing acceptability but also of destroying it. Public trust in authorities is a major influence on acceptance of decisions, which cannot be overseen in detail. Recent research shows
that the issues of risk governance and participation, and media influence and public trust are more complex than often assumed.

Risk Governance

The technical and knowledge-based approach to risk increasingly acknowledges a role for the social and subjective aspects of risk, as the previous chapter showed. These problems are embedded in a more general perspective on risk governance (TRUSTNET 2004), which is mainly about how decisions can be made in a publicly acceptable way. The focus shifts from a technical question of risk to general ideas of democracy and public participation. The central assumption is that participation can increase public acceptance of risky decisions. A range of instruments (such as consensus-conferences, public debates, roadshows, and surveys) have been developed to facilitate public participation. Recent research shows that participation alone is not enough and that attempts to foster acceptance may prove counterproductive. The idea of shaping public opinion may come into conflict with the idea of democracy, which assumes early public involvement in risky decisions, and a highly transparent decision-making process.

The ideal of consensus is not necessarily attainable (STAGE 2005), and it is sometimes necessary to find solutions in such cases. Japp gives a number of examples (2000, compare Zinn 2004a: 17). He suggests that partial interests could become embedded in more general collective interests so that interest groups may accept compromises to promote public welfare. Another strategy is moving from a pure instrumental rationality to a more symbolic rationality, to shift perspectives on the problem and its solution (compare also Hutter, Chapter 10). The pressing question in this area still is how risk governance can be developed in a way which is morally and democratically acceptable to the public.

The Media

Many approaches to risk assume that the media exert significant influence on social identities, risk definitions, risk selection, and the knowledge people have about risks, and are therefore central to risk awareness and to explanations of people's responses to risk.

From an objective perspective, the media were understood as a channel for public information and a means to overcome an irrational risk aversion. Sociological approaches initially also tended to conceptualize the role of the media as framing public understanding of risk or facilitating
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The development of ‘risk consciousness’ (Beck 1992: 23, 132f.). Although it soon became clear that the relationship between the media and the public is much more complex, systematic research in this field is comparatively underdeveloped.

Significant changes in understanding of the media during the 1990s had major implications for approaches to risk, risk perceptions, and risk-taking. The classical approach, focused on the objectivity, rationality, and accuracy of media coverage (e.g. Freudenburg et al. 1996; Wilson 2000), encountered serious difficulties. On the one hand, the fundamental assumption that the role of the media was to support the public in making adequate judgements by providing objective information met the problem that often such objective knowledge is not available (Adams 1995: 194f.; Kitzinger 1999; Murdock, Petts, and Horlick-Jones 2003). On the other hand, the implicit and widely disseminated assumption that media reports have a determining influence upon public risk perception (e.g. Renn et al. 1992; Spencer and Triche 1994) was confronted with evidence that the subject has a relatively more active role concerning the interpretation of and response to risk (compare Kitzinger and Murdock, Chapter 12).

Assumptions like the notion of a general risk consciousness in the risk society approach (Beck 1992) or the determining influence of the mass media on the public (e.g. Adams 1995; Kasperson and Kasperson 1996) contain oversimplifications. Media research as well as sociocultural studies show the ambivalence of audience attitudes towards the information they receive about risk, the range of partial, ambiguous, and contradictory views about the benefits and wisdom of the scientific knowledge individuals hold, and the contradictions, incoherence, and disagreement in the ways in which these groups actively make sense of the threat posed in areas such as environmental hazards (Irwin et al. 1999: 1312).

Sociocultural studies show that risks are discursively constructed in everyday life with reference to the mass media, individual experience and biography, local memory, moral convictions, and personal judgements. The mass media are only one among other important factors (Tulloch 2000: 197; Murdock, Petts, and Horlick-Jones 2003). Quantitative surveys on general risk awareness may well give little information on peoples’ individual assumptions about the risks that they face—a point often summed up as the ‘impersonal impact hypothesis’ (Dickens 1992; Coleman 1993; Wilkinson 2001b: 13).

The wide range of different findings in media studies cannot be explained by a set of general rules or logics. They seem rather to be
influenced by the substantive nature of the particular topic under consideration (Kitzinger 1999: 57) and/or to be the result of specific situational constellations. Studies which compare media coverage at different points in time tend to show that the social and political context is essential for understanding risk-reporting and how it changes over time (Kitzinger 1999: 59). This suggests that research on the framing of risk perception by the media can only fully be understood by simultaneous analysis of the context of risk-reports and a careful ‘ethnographic’ analysis of the individual's embeddedness in cultural and social contexts and biographical experiences.

Trust

Public trust in expertise, science, and politicians has declined, particularly as a result of the major accidents of the 1980s (Chapter 2). The problem for politicians is exacerbated by the evidence that trust is much easier to destroy than to rebuild (Axelrod 1981; Coleman 1986; Fukuyama 1996; Gambetta 1998; Putnam 2000; Le Grand 2003: 29 etc. see Pidgeon, Kasperson, and Slovic 2003, 31–2). Establishing trust has become a topic of central interest for decision-makers and for risk researchers, in order to facilitate the public acceptance of policy decisions (Jungerman et al. 1996). In this section, we review psychological and sociological approaches.

Psychological work on trust relationships between the public and institutions initially identified two main themes: the characteristics of the agency to be trusted and particularly its competence to carry out the role assigned to it (Renn and Levine 1991), and the relationship between the values of the agency and the citizen (Siegrist, Cvetovitch, and Roth 2000). These general dimensions have been subdivided into a number of component factors, including perceived competence, objectivity, fairness, consistency, care, and faith (Hovland et al. 1953; Renn and Levine 1991; Frewer et al. 1996; Metlay 1999). Recent work indicates that trust may be bound up with more general and fundamental attitudes towards an issue, which provides the basis for both trust and risk judgements (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2005). This could also help to explain why some studies show only a limited influence of trust on the understanding of risk (Sjöberg 2001; Viklund 2003).

The support for the existence of more general beliefs or attitudes fundamental to the relationship between trust and risk offers opportunities to link to the more cultural and emotional approaches to trust, even though
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it is still controversial whether the domain under consideration plays a greater role in influencing trust and risk judgement (Petts 1998; Weyman and Kelly 1999: 30), or is a general attitude which does not vary much across different domains of risk (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2004).

Earle and Cvetovich (1995) argue that in everyday life, most people find complex risk issues too difficult and wearisome to analyse, and resort to a general sense of sympathy with the institution (or otherwise) rather than cognition to guide them. This parallels sociological approaches which assume that culture plays a central role in trust and risk. It is also supported by transnational research which shows significant cross-national differences in trust (Renn and Rohrmann 2000; Viklund 2003; Delhey and Newton 2005). These require more detailed investigation.

Sociological approaches have adopted a broad conceptualization of trust to include self-confidence as well as trust in worldviews (religion, ideology), in institutions (the family, the state), in abstract systems (money, economy, medicine), or in others (partner, friends, group, neighbourhood). Trust is a fundamental prerequisite of complex modern societies to enable people to act and secure social cohesion (Luhmann 1979; Barber 1983). When societies became more and more complex, the significance of trust in ‘abstract systems’ became increasingly necessary to manage everyday life (Giddens 1991). Trust exists between knowledge and ignorance (Simmel 1968: 393). In this sense the function of trust can be defined as solving the problem of limited knowledge (Giddens 1995: 48) by reducing its complexity (Luhmann 1979).

Trust may also be understood as a matter of choice when there is a possibility of failure (Crasswell 1993). Because it is actively given and therefore closely linked to the modern idea of risk, Luhmann (1979) distinguishes trust from other forms of non-rational strategies to secure expectations, such as hope or confidence. When there is no possibility of choice, it is confidence or hope rather than trust that is at stake. A small number of writers suggest that trust applies to circumstances where we do not reflect on the issue. Once we make conscious decisions about whether to trust someone or not trust is already threatened. From this perspective, trust reduces to uncritical habit.

Further developments identify a new form of trust emerging within modernity. This is ‘active trust’ (Giddens 1994) or ‘reflexive trust’ (Bonss and Zinn 2005) associated with the shift from a class stratified to a functionally differentiated form of society. Giddens (1994) argues that in modernity a routinely given trust in abstract systems (such as the expert systems, represented by scientists, doctors, and other
professionals—1991) is increasingly accompanied by active trust. Active trust has to be won; it is not predetermined by status or gender role. It is autonomously given and is therefore a powerful source of social solidarity (Giddens 1994: 14f.). In the more uncertain conditions of late modernity, democratic decision-making rests on the ‘clever citizen’—well informed and able to criticize policy—and a dialogic style of governance—in which government must seek to attract active trust. Optimistically, Giddens proposes that clever citizens and open governance will lead to a ‘democratization of democracy’. He recognizes, but has not entirely resolved, the problems of uncertainty that such a process involves. Individuals must choose and may revise their choices about trust in personal relationships and in political and social institutions. They must work to build and sustain trust, but there can be no guarantee of success. It is unclear whether such a dialogue will necessarily lead to consensus when the interests, knowledge, and values of experts, politicians, and lay-people systematically differ.

Most research concurs on the importance of trust in the current context and agrees that further research is needed. Unresolved key debates cover a considerable number of areas:

- The complexity and in particular the number of dimensions involved in trust (relating to sources of information about risk, processes by which risk policies are enacted, the relationship between the basic values of the institution trusted and the trusting citizen, and the domains of risk in question);
- The importance of trust in risk perception;
- The relationship between trust, risk judgement, and the acceptability of a risk; the role of cultural differences and of affect;
- The extent to which the problem concerns the factors which influence how a message from a particular source is received, rather than interaction between the risk assumptions of lay-people (derived from cultural and other sources) and those of experts.

New Insights into Factors Affecting Individual Choices in Everyday Life

In several disciplines (economics, psychology, and sociology) and domains of risk research, it became clear that the way people make decisions in the course of their life is much more complex than is understood
in terms of rationality and rational deliberation (Elster 1998; Jaeger et al. 2001; Loewenstein et al. 2001; Pixley 2004). When resources are limited and/or no certain knowledge is available, or just in order to manage a broad range of uncertainties in everyday life, individuals refer to different strategies. They use a range of heuristics (Tversky and Kahneman 1982) and refer to emotion, trust, tradition, belief, and other factors. Besides the cultural framing of decision-making and especially recognition of the role of emotions challenged theoretical considerations and empirical research.

Cultural approaches to risk have emphasized at an early stage that emotions and affect are a major issue in relation to identity and group affiliation and thus to the perception and management of risk (Douglas 1966; Lash 2000; Tulloch and Lupton 2003). A positive approach, which interprets risk itself as the motivation to take risks, is outlined in the edgework approach (Lyng 2005) and is also used to explain deviant behaviour in criminology. More remarkable in this context is the tendency in technical, objectivistic, and rational approaches to risk to accept that emotion can be something positive, a prerequisite for decision-making in the first place.

**Emotion and Affect**

Sociological theorists, cognitive psychologists, and economists traditionally understood emotions as contradicting rationality. Fundamental work done by Elias (1978, 1982, 1994) interprets the process of modernization as the control and domestication of irrational emotions prioritizing rational thinking. In the tradition of these early analyses, emotions are mainly seen as destabilizing modernity (Luhmann 1995) or as the negative outcome of the growing uncertainties of current developments (Giddens 1991). This orthodox perspective was questioned by cultural approaches which introduced a positive interpretation of risk and uncertainty (Lupton and Tulloch 2002; Tulloch and Lupton 2003), especially in the context of 'edgework' (Lyng 2005) and of reflexive modernization (Zinn 2004).

Emotions as the cause of action were also acknowledged in economics thinking. Keynes (1936: 161–2) famously argued ‘that a large proportion of our positive activities depend on spontaneous optimism rather than mathematical expectations, whether moral or hedonistic or economic. Most, probably, of our decisions to do something positive, the full consequences of which will be drawn out over many days to come, can only
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be taken as the result of animal spirits—a spontaneous urge to action rather than inaction, and not as the outcome of a weighted average of quantitative benefits multiplied by quantitative probabilities.'

The need for emotions for entrepreneurial and innovative decision-making was accepted in economics (Pixley 2002: 83); in conventional thinking on judgement emotions were interpreted as disturbances to an otherwise superior rationality. This view was also shared by technical approaches on risk, concerned that the objectively best risk calculations become confounded by values and irrational beliefs.

Decision-making research accommodates emotions mainly as the expected accompaniments of particular courses of action. One reason may be that emotions as expectations can easily be added to the list of items weighed up in the conventional rational choice model. Risky choices then can be predicted by assuming that people assess the severity and likelihood of the possible outcomes of choice alternatives, albeit subjectively and possibly with bias or error, and integrate this information through some type of expectation-based calculus to arrive at a decision.

This perspective differs from the view of researchers engaged in other psychological research domains, as neuroscience and social psychology. They focus much more on how immediate emotions influence decision-making (Loewenstein et al. 2001). In contrast to earlier approaches, emotions and affects are no longer solely interpreted as aberrations in decision-making, but as a prerequisite. For example, Damasio (1996) has argued, referring to research on people with specific brain injuries, that emotions are necessary to value alternatives in the decision-making process (the 'somatic marker' hypothesis). Emotions and rationality necessarily interact in order to direct the decision-making process. In his view, rapid and basic emotional evaluation combined with a rational assessment would produce good decisions in a limited time. In this way, feelings have a direct effect on decision-making. Clore, Schwarz, and Conway (1994) argue that feelings affect people's judgements or choices within a decision-process in those cases where the feelings are experienced as reactions to the imminent judgement or decision.

The research of Alhakami and Slovic (1994) and Finucane et al. (2000) conceptualizes affect1 as an 'orienting mechanism' (Slovic 1999: 694f.). Affect is prior to the rational evaluation of alternatives. 'It thus appears that the affective response is primary, and the risk and benefit judgments are derived (at least partly) from it' (Slovic 1999: 694). It is easy to imagine a socio-biological account of how rapid 'hard-wired' responses
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to threats might be highly valued compared with rational ones that took longer to execute. There are also parallels to the notion of ‘quick trust’ (Alaszewski 2003: 238) or ‘facwork-based trust’ (Cook, ch. 1 in Kramer and Cook 2004) to account for the processes whereby people make decisions whether or not to trust doctors on the basis of brief interviews when they themselves are not competent to judge the technical issues (compare also Eiser and colleagues 2002).

Emotional intensity seems to influence significantly risk perception and risk-taking, as well. Emotions at a comparatively low level of intensity can be understood to play the role of an advisor in decision-making. The evaluation of one’s feelings is then used to find out how to judge (Loewenstein et al. 2001). Conversely, intense emotions might rule out cognitive consideration. This fits in with the observation that under specific circumstances, risk calculation as a whole is rejected (Japp 2000; Rescher 1983; Loewenstein et al. 2001). One of the reasons to reject risk-taking is that probable outcomes are seen as so horrible or catastrophic that even the smallest probability acquires an unbearable emotional weight (e.g., resistance to vaccination because it is believed to cause autism, or the refusal to deal with nuclear energy as a whole because of the incalculable damages of a serious accident). The problem that emotions and rationality sometimes do not coincide (Loewenstein et al. 2001) is rarely considered in the context of risk research, but is a common topic in research on intrapersonal conflict (Schelling 1984). People are often overwhelmed by their emotions and cannot act rationally, even if they want to (Rolls 1999).

Edgework

Another perspective on emotions interprets them not just as a prerequisite for action in general but emphasizes the thrill which accompanies specific risk-taking activities. This perspective is outlined in the edgework approach (Lyng 2005), which is mainly applied to explain participation in ‘manifestly irrational’ leisure time activities (Lyng and Snow 1986) such as high-risk sports. It is also used in criminology in order to understand the motivation for some criminal activities (Katz 1988; Ferrell and Sanders 1995). Edgework can also take place in a broad range of activities, including mountaineering, skydiving, some aspects of working life (stock market trading, rigging scenery, and lighting), crime, drug use, and the arts.

Edgework deviates in many respects from other approaches to risk. It is close to recent cultural approaches to issues of identity, in its emphasis
on emotions, and related issues such as aesthetics. The main assumption is that risk and uncertainty itself attract people. This attraction is not just explained as an anthropological constant but is understood in two different ways in respect to modern society. From one view, edgework is interpreted as an escape from the normative demands of modern society which determine individual opportunities to shape one's life and gain original experiences. Society is seen as limiting individual activities. From the opposite perspective, exploring the limits of control is understood as an expression of the normative idea of modern society extended into the domain of leisure time activities (Lyng 2005: 5). On this view it can be expected that people who explore the edge in everyday life (e.g. in their work) are also inclined to do so during their leisure time by bungee jumping, sky surfing, or similar activities. The edgework approach helps to explain different styles of risk-taking with the help of emotions. How this behaviour can be embedded in general societal developments is still controversial.

Emotional experiences are often seen as positioned beyond rational, cognitive, and textual approaches to risk. In the context of edgework, the focus is on exciting experiences that people actively seek. Recent research on health and illness has also considered how people manage the experience of involuntary suffering (Wilkinson 2004a, b).

**Challenges in Risk Research**

Risk perception, responses to risk, and risk-taking have tended to be analysed through strategies which examine a specific decision or a specific attitude. Approaches which focus attention on context and on the interaction of different factors in risk perception and response raise questions of how risk issues are to be understood interactively, in relation to other risks and dynamically, over time.

One approach points out that much analysis focuses on risks as isolated instances, whilst in everyday life, people respond to a range of mutually interacting risks. There are indications that the embeddedness of a risk in a range of competing alternatives influences how such risks are evaluated. For example, in research on health and illness the risk of an illness tends to be interpreted against the background of other current and previous illnesses (Faircloth et al. 2004; Pound, Gompertz, and Ebrahim 1998). Health issues are generally embedded in common patterns of behaviour regarding life (risks) in general as Cornwell (1984) has shown in research on working class responses to risk of illness.
Second, risk research has benefited greatly from the stronger interest in culture and experience at the individual level in sociology since the 1980s, whilst in psychology a move in the same direction, from methodological individualism to the inclusion of cultural issues, has been apparent in recent years (see Chapter 2). This ‘cultural turn’ (see also John Tulloch’s discussion in Chapter 6) opens up new ways of understanding the richness of the contexts in which people perceive and respond to risks. However, there are real issues about how such approaches are to be linked with the more institutional accounts of risk society theories or the macrosociology of governmentality approaches.

There is comparatively little research on the dynamics of how people experience risks or how they develop specific ways of approaching risks over time. Whilst at the macro-level there is little progress in theorizing risk processes since the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (see Chapter 2), there have recently been promising developments at the micro-level. In psychology Eiser (2003) attempts to bring together risk research with cognitive and social learning theory. In sociology the biographical approach develops without attracting much attention from mainstream risk research. It focuses on how people develop specific patterns of action and behaviour under changing social conditions. In these processes, risks and uncertainties are central issues (Zinn 2005).

Referring to learning and social learning theory Eiser (2005) explores the range of problems that result from the fact that a successful risk learner needs to gather appropriate feedback from the environment on when to pursue or not to pursue a course of action, and to be able to modify behaviour accordingly. Learning theory deals with how we assimilate information from practical situations, whilst social learning theory (Mischel and Shoda 1995) extends this to the experientially based views that people acquire about the social environment in which they live and how they can handle it with confidence. In practice, many of the risk situations we deal with provide poor feedback. For example, most of the time speeding drivers reach their destinations safely—and learn that the risks associated with speeding do not apply to them (Eiser 2005: 23).

In sociology, there has been considerable interest in new methods which provide nuanced and detailed understanding of the way individual experience and context contribute to people’s perceptions of and responses to risk. One important approach now attracting attention is biographical methodology (Chamberlayne et al. 2000, 2002; Rosenthal
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2004). 'The purpose of the sociobiographical approach is to avoid the overgeneralization and abstraction of many social research methods, which often reduce individuals to aggregates, averages, or bundles of variables, and which lose sight of the coherence of individual lives' (Chamberlayne, Rustin, and Wengraf 2002: 3). The focus is the subject's interpretation of life situations, and choices in response to them; how individuals maintain their identity or restore an injured identity over time. This approach and other qualitative methods allow researchers to explore how specific interpretations and action patterns develop during their lives. They help to explain why people respond differently to specific risks. They also facilitate examination of how competing risks interact in the way individuals cope with uncertainty and how emotions are interconnected in experiencing, remembering, and learning from the past. In this way, learning and social learning theory and biographical approaches could complement each other.

Another challenge for risk research is globalization. Global warming, epidemics of influenza, the spread of GM food through world trade agreements, or international terrorism attract growing attention. The link between national and transnational factors is not sufficiently theorized and empirically analysed. The predominant focus on western industrialized societies neglects the question of how such countries and their risk practices are linked to those of other nations and cultures and how they mutually influence them.

In this context still under-examined national differences in terms of institutional risk regimes and risk culture(s) become more important in explaining complex transnational interrelationships. It remains unclear why specific risks raise greater concern in some countries than in others and why more general risk awareness is differently developed in different societies. Although some comparative studies exist (e.g. regarding risk perception [Renn and Rohrmann 2000] or trust Delhey and Newton 2005) there is scope for further research.

These sociocultural and institutional differences are linked to another issue which receives little attention. Risk is not just an objective entity but also a specific way of understanding society and placing a value on particular approaches to opportunities and dangers. Social institutional changes bound up with greater international competition, the introduction of new and more flexible technologies, the shift towards a post-industrial society, changes in the status and role of women, and other factors all interact to restructure the agenda of risks that people recognize and confront in their everyday life. This leads to the emergence
of 'new social risks' associated with problems in access to employment or satisfactory childcare or lack of appropriate education and training (Taylor-Gooby 2004). Much work on risk and social change analyses risk from perspectives that focus on individual experience and pay little attention to structural social inequalities. At the same time a moral programme of individual responsibility in public policy reinforces discrimination against disadvantaged groups, as social supports are withdrawn in a neoliberal policy context. This raises the issues of how perceptions of risk are used as a resource in different systems of governance and how risk causes different affects in the diverse sociocultural styles of government in Europe and elsewhere.

Such a perspective resembles constructivism in the governmentality perspective. More recently Baker and Simon (2002) diagnosed a fundamental shift in understanding of the role of insurance (social as well as private). The notion of solidarity and risk-pooling through insurance has become increasingly supplanted by a more active and enterprising approach they term 'embracing risk'. They draw on a strong current research tradition in identifying two general cultural trends, which are most evident in Anglophone countries (see Rose 1996; Dean 1999; O'Malley 2004). Increasingly, social problems are conceived and addressed in terms of risk, and various efforts have been made to make people individually accountable for risks. The paradigm of solidarity is being eroded by new developments which return responsibility to the individual and differentiate the population through lifestyle, and exposures to risk and behavioural patterns. The return of the market is associated with a cultural change which accords greater value to success in business enterprise, stock market speculation, and other high-risk financial activities, and promotes wider public engagement in such ventures. This perspective shows how the notion of risk leads to different outcomes in different sociocultural and institution contexts.

Conclusion

This review points out the wide range of new avenues for research resulting from the developments of the past two decades. Risk research is now at a juncture where the interlinking of perspectives and methods from different disciplinary traditions offers excellent opportunities for taking research forward and for developing richer theoretical understanding of
risk and uncertainty as central features of how people live their lives in a distinctively modern form of society. We go on to examine these developments in detail across the main areas of research in the following chapters.

Note

1. Affect in this context is ‘defined as a positive (like) or negative (dislike) evaluative feeling toward an external stimulus (e.g. some hazard such as cigarette smoking)’ (Slovic 1999: 694).

References

The Challenge of New Risks


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