

Introduction: Learning about Risk

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Key words: risk,
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Abstract: The special issue "Learning about Risk" draws on the launch conference of the ESRC "Social Contexts and Responses to Risk" network (SCARR) held at 28th – 29th January 2005 in Canterbury. The SCARR network is an interdisciplinary network on risk which examines perceptions of and responses to risk in a range of areas, including sexual behaviour and partnering choices, the mass media, faith and ethnicity, pensions and financial planning, industrial pollution, crime, transport, energy policy and environmental hazards.

The network's launch conference reflected the interdisciplinary character of risk research including a range of different methods and approaches to risk, directed at diverse objects of interest. The idea of the special issue is to link together this diversity and interdisciplinarity in risk research, and to encourage perspectives that look beyond the boundaries of single disciplines and methodological approaches.

The papers in this publication demonstrate the value of insights from different disciplinary backgrounds in this area and point to the opportunities and challenges in the work that remains to be done in drawing these several perspectives more closely together.

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1. Introduction

The special issue "Learning about risk" draws on the launch conference of the ESRC "Social Contexts and Responses to Risk" network (SCARR) held at 28th – 29th January 2005 in Canterbury. [1]

The *SCARR network* brings together sociologists, psychologists, economists, experts on social policy, the media, socio-legal studies and law and other social scientists from 14 universities in nine linked projects. The research examines perceptions of and responses to risk in a range of areas, including sexual behaviour and partnering choices, pensions and financial planning, industrial pollution, crime, transport and environmental hazards. SCARR promotes academic work, particularly through the sharing of insights and approaches across disciplines (compare <http://www.kent.ac.uk/scarr/index.htm>). [2]

The network's launch conference reflected the interdisciplinary character of risk research containing heterogeneous methods and approaches to risk, and aiming at diverse objects of interest. The idea of the special issue is to hold together this diversity and interdisciplinarity in risk research, and to encourage researchers to look beyond the boundaries of single disciplines and methodological approaches. Furthermore, it provides us with insights into the current state of affairs in risk research. [3]

This is a comparatively new and rapidly developing research area¹, and methodological and conceptual issues have not yet been adequately addressed. This issue on "Learning about Risk" addresses questions of how to conceptualise risk, how to approach risk, and how to bridge disciplinary boundaries, and will provide us with a broad range of recent research results. [4]

2. Risk and Uncertainty as a Social Construct

Describing the world from the perspective of risk is not a self-evident process but a social construction. This approach can be traced back to antiquity but became widely disseminated with the development of the mathematical theory of probability and statistics in early modernity (BERNSTEIN 1997). Early applications are in trade in the early development of insurance against the loss of ships or goods and in money-lending. However, the core of the concept of risk is not its mathematical calculability but the exposure of something to vulnerability in order to make a gain (LUHMANN 1993). In terms of general worldviews it is an expression of a change in understanding nature, which is not determined by fate or God but lies within the compass of human responsibility (BERNSTEIN 1997). [5]

In recent decades the concept of risk spread across a growing number of domains²: from early forms of insurance and the development of social insurance systems to technical risk assessment; from a rather statistical and technical to a more social and subjective understanding of risk, and into diverse domains of application such as crime, the media, family and partnership, social inequality, health and illness and everyday life, as well as the life course, social and public policy, and risk regulation and management (compare TAYLOR-GOOBY & ZINN 2006). [6]

In modern industrialised societies the concept of risk continues to develop (BECK 1992). Even though we live in a society which is safer than ever before, we are much more concerned with the limits of control than the gains. Negative issues play an increasingly important role in public discourse. Catastrophes resulting from the application of technology (Bhopal, Chernobyl, BSE) and the increasing awareness of more comprehensive disasters (such as global warming and climate change) have accelerated the rise of risk on the political agenda. Large

1 This is documented by the lack of national and international organisations for risk research (for example, the European Sociological Association has only recently established a Research Network on the [Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty](#)).

2 "Risk" became enormously influential as a way to describe reality and manage social problems in a specific way, especially in states with neo-liberal styles of governance (POWER 2004).

scale low probability calamities are seen as unacceptable because of their potential damage, and public resistance to innovation has gained ground in several domains (for example: genetically modified food or vaccination). The public readiness to take risks decreases and risk aversion expands. Some authors interpret this trend as the growth of a pervasive "culture of fear" (FUREDÌ 2002). [7]

Moral and ethical questions have also gained ground (BECK 1992) since the public had become aware of the limits of technical safety and scientific certainty, and that value decisions are involved even in relation to technical issues. More general questions are now at stake concerning the kind of world we would like to live in, and the technical developments we wish to support, or the risks we are willing to take. [8]

Risk research is influenced by these developments. Since political decisions generally take place under limited knowledge and high uncertainty the need for certain knowledge is enormous. Political decision makers need information about the public acceptance for future technologies and risky decision making and encourage the relevant research. The positivist, objectivist paradigm of risk and decision making has produced valuable insights into risk perception and decision making but also reveals the limits of simple models of objectivity and rationality. "Soft" or "qualitative" data and methods attract greater attention, even in technical approaches to risk (ZINN & TAYLOR-GOOBY 2006). [9]

3. Different Approaches and New Developments in Risk Research: The Issue of "Learning about Risk"

Although there is a strong focus on sociological approaches to risk in this issue, several articles refer to the much broader interdisciplinary enterprise of risk research encompassing different research strategies and disciplines. [10]

In the positivist tradition of technical risk research, dominant in risk assessment, toxicological studies and the insurance industry, risks and gains are calculated against the background of past experiences. The cost of accidents is calculated and weighed against the costs (for example, in money, life expectancy, or deaths) of reducing such accidents by further measures. [11]

Referring to such an objectivist concept of risk, from the perspective of risk communication approach the core question is *how risks*—often regarding the introduction of new technologies—*can be managed by strategies to communicate* them in the right way. Here the original idea of the top down communication of the "objective" risk and/or best judgement was often ineffective in directing public behaviour. More recent approaches focus on the general organisation of communication processes and on encouraging the participation of lay-people. Typically objective risks are distinguished from subjective valuation and ethical questions. The contribution of [KLINKE and RENN](#) on the management of new systemic risks contributes to this discussion. [12]

More closely linked to psychology the well established psychometric approach focuses on risk perception (SLOVIC 2000). An objective risk is typically assumed and its public perception is examined through standardised instruments. The central research questions concern *how people perceive different risks* and the way in which different factors influence their perceptions. This research has attempted to integrate sociocultural factors as well as trust and emotion (SLOVIC 1999). [FLYNN et al.](#) refer to this research tradition in their assessment of risk perception in relation to the use of hydrogen as a source of energy. [13]

In decision making research, drawing on cognitive psychology and (behavioural) economics the research question is *how people make choices*. The aim is to discover with the help of laboratory experiments general behavioural laws which can be applied to different cases and decision making situations. Cognitive psychologists as TVERSKY and KAHNEMAN (1981) tended to assume that the best decision could be made on objective rational grounds, and examined processes that led to deviations from such solutions. Conventional approaches in economics support such a perspective but have been complemented by research in the tradition of behavioural economics which examines how people actually decide in real life situations. In this tradition the contributions of [TWYMAN et al.](#) and [HARVEY et al.](#) examine how people use advice about risk and make decisions about the risk judgements of others. Some recent research in the tradition of behavioural economics has re-evaluated the interpretation of heuristics and biases as intrinsically negative distortions by showing that they can be more effective and efficient than instrumental rationality and may be appropriate to decision-making under appropriate circumstances (GIGERENZER & TODD 2001). [14]

The range of contributions from a more sociological perspective is concerned with the *sociocultural construction of risks*. One tradition in sociological work on risk and uncertainty is conceptually close to the work of DOUGLAS (1966, 1985). Risk is examined in relation to processes of identity formation. Several articles contribute to this stream of research. The often under-examined differences and inequalities in the perception, the responses and the resources of people are examined by [ABBOTT et al.](#) [BOECK et al.](#) examine the question of inequalities in crime within a social capital framework. [HOGGART](#) shows how contradicting debates on sexuality and young people find their way into young women's views on sexual behaviour. Finally, [ALASZEWSKI et al.](#) examine how people cope with life-threatening trauma of stroke. Even though there is increasing interest in risk management in everyday life, there are also *methodological problems* to be considered. Some experiences and critical thoughts are presented by [SMITH and colleagues](#). [15]

In organisational sociology the internal processes of decision making are examined in order to find out how mistakes and disasters can happen even in high security organisations (for example VAUGHAN 1996, TURNER 1997). From a broader perspective organisations are seen as social actors and how they manage risks. [LUNT et al.](#) contribute to this research. They analyse the relationship between risk and consumer policy in new regulatory bodies in the

financial and communication sectors in Britain. Finally, [SIMONS and LENSCH](#) examine how the risks of malnutrition could be reduced. [16]

While the definition of risk is not a central problem from a positivist perspective, it is at the core of much sociological research. Socio-cultural approaches address the various ways in which people understand risk (TULLOCH & LUPTON 2003, LUPTON 1999). Other research engages with the concepts of risk used in research, in public administration, social work and other public domains. How are the terms "risk", "at risk" and "risky" constructed, what are their effects and how have they changed? Such questions are addressed by three contributions. [SHARLAND](#) shows how in social work and in the analysis of social work practice, ideas of risks and riskyness are constructed and proposes a more open perspective. [WARNER](#) uses detailed analysis of case notes and interviews with practitioners to show how what is to count as risk and the way in which risk is associated with particular clients are constructed through professional practice. [SEIGNEUR](#) examines the problem of defining risk through the example of mountaineering. [17]

Although risk research is an interdisciplinary project the possibilities of combining methods and approaches from different disciplines are rarely discussed (exceptions are: HENWOOD & PIDGEON 2001). [JACKSON et al.](#) contribute to the issue in discussing how to bridge different levels of analysis in risk perception research. [18]

Finally, new developments in risk theorizing are addressed by the contributions of ZINN. The growing awareness of [emotion in risk research](#) as well as [developments in sociological theorising on risk and perspectives for research](#) are outlined. [19]

The papers in this publication cover a wide range of issues in recent research on risk and responses to it, both by individuals and by governments and other social institutions. They demonstrate the value of insights from different disciplinary backgrounds in this area and point out the scale of the work that remains to be done in drawing these several perspectives more closely together. [20]

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