The Impact of Social and Cultural Difference in Relation to Job Loss and Financial Planning: Reflections on the Risk Society

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Abstract: This paper is based on data collected as part of a research study which looks at how different social and cultural groups frame, and respond to, the risk of income and/or job loss. Writers like LASH, DOUGLAS and LUPTON have placed an emphasis on the importance of group membership and social categories in structuring response to different types of risk preferring to talk about "risk cultures" rather than "risk society". However, the writers acknowledge that there is little empirical research which explores this.

As the first stage of our research, focus groups in two parts of the UK explored the relationship between risk and social difference with an emphasis on the risk of job or income loss. The groups were comprised of lesbian, gay and bisexual people; people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds; Disabled people; and, people who actively practice a religion. Participants did not see strong links between their sexuality, race, or religion and their perceptions of, or responses to, risk. Income, and attitudinal factors were cited as being more important. Disabled people however were much more likely to make connections between being disabled and a range of barriers to responding to risky situations.

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1. Introduction

As part of a wider network which is examining the social contexts in which people respond to risk, researchers from the Universities of York and Bristol in the UK are examining the extent to which social and cultural differences influence risk discourses and responses. Although cultural considerations of risk date back to DOUGLAS' seminal work (DOUGLAS 1985, 1992), it is only more recently that cultural approaches to risk have once again begun to enjoy prominence. Nonetheless, with the exception of the recent work of TULLOCH and LUPTON (2003), there has been little systematic examination of the way in which social differences affect the framing of and response to risk at an empirical (or theoretical) level. Although social differences have been included in some accounts of risk-related health and sexual behaviour and epidemiology (BUNTON et al. 1995), previous research has focused largely on white people in employment and on class differentials (ABBOTT & QUILGARS 2001; BURCHARDT & HILLS 1997). This research aims to redress some of this balance by focussing on four dimensions of difference—disability, sexuality, ethnicity and faith. Financial risk associated with the loss of employment and/or income amongst work-aged people (aged 30-50) is chosen as the substantive area of enquiry given its centrality to most people's "everyday" experiences (TULLOCH & LUPTON 2003). In addition, labour markets and welfare systems are two of the main sites in which the dominant theory of the "risk society" has been discussed. [1]

Below, the paper outlines some of the key theoretical debates relevant to the research alongside the research hypothesis and methodology. The second section of the paper presents the findings from a series of eight focus groups with people from the research's four groups of interest. [2]

1.1 Challenging the risk society thesis

The risk society thesis (BECK 1992; GIDDENS 1991) has now dominated sociological theories of risk for over a decade to the extent that its central ideas have both been influenced by, but also arguably directly influenced, the policy making process in the UK (QUILGARS & ABBOTT 2000). In the theory of reflexive modernisation, it is asserted that the process of globalisation has exerted a pressure on nation states to change their structures and policies to better respond to new socio-economic world relations. Traditionally the welfare state in the UK responded both to unforeseen events or hazards (for example, unemployment, divorce, sickness) and planned events (for instance, retirement). However, since the early 1980s, successive governments have increasingly curtailed the level of, and eligibility for, many forms of state provision (MCRAE 1995; SKINNER & FORD 2000). Today, individuals are expected to make

provision for many of their welfare needs over the short, medium and long term. At the same time, socio-economic changes, such as labour market deregulation and the expansion of owner occupation (in particular, low-income home ownership) have meant that the UK has become an increasingly "risky" society, with more people at risk of unemployment and insecure employment than was the case 30 years ago (SKINNER & FORD 2000). [3]

Within the context of the modernisation process, it is argued that individuals necessarily become more informed citizens, reflexively reflecting on and reacting to these changes, and the increased array of choices, to create their own biographies—less constrained by the old inequalities of class and socio-structure, rather influenced by a myriad of new features of late modern societies. Reflexive individuals become more sceptical of the state and expert advice, less likely to trust such external sources of information, preferring to rely instead on them-selves and their ability to interpret "knowledge" within the information society. A process of individualisation results, chiefly in terms of how individuals think and behave (as well as in the formulation of new policies shifting responsibilities away from the, now perceived, constrained state, and towards the agency of the individual). [4]

Important questions, however, are raised about the extent to which these risks are understood and, if perceived, how risks are managed. Influenced by rational choice theory, current policy-making tends to assume that people perceive and respond to financial risks in a uniform way so that there will be a "substitution effect" as individuals respond "rationally" to cuts in state welfare by seeking market based provision (SKINNER & FORD 2000). Research has however already shown that many people do not behave in this way, failing to make such provision and therefore being inadequately prepared for foreseeable as well as unforeseeable events (ACTUARIAL PROFESSION 2004; FSA 2002; QUILGARS & ABBOTT 2000; SADLER 2002). [5]

The central hypothesis of this research is that the risk society thesis insufficiently explains the framing and response to risk for many groups in society, with the applicability of its central ideas being particularly unrealistic for some groups (compared to others). For example, the most influential factor in predicting the likelihood of financial exclusion is benefit status and, in particular, being an unemployed tenant in receipt of benefits (KEMPSON & WHYLEY 1999). Research on people in employment has also found that ability to afford financial products is the key determinant of take-up for low income workers (QUILGARS & ABBOTT 2001). Whilst BECK (1992) has paid slightly more attention to the effect of structure than GIDDENS, it is generally accepted that the risk society thesis has largely ignored the continuing pervasiveness of structure in late-modern society (LUPTON 1999). In addition, low levels of financial literacy at the EU and national level challenge the notion of informed consumers (JONES 2004), with LASH (1994) arguing that modernity has produced new information and com-munication structures that has effectively reduced the agency of many groups in society. Finally, research has also indicated that many retain a belief in the efficacy of state provision and a scepticism of the ability of the private sector to

protect them (BURCHARDT et al. 1999; FORD 1999; JONES 2004; TAYLOR-
GOOBY et al. 1999). [6]

However, perhaps even more fundamentally, it can be argued that the risk
society has placed too great an emphasis on the role of the "individual" whilst
ignoring complex cultural processes that affect both perceptions and responses
of groups of people within society. DOUGLAS' work (1985; 1992) provides the
most well-known account of cultural relativity with respect to risk—where different
groups of people within the same culture may frame and understand risk
differently according to symbolic and shared assumptions derived from the nature
of social groups, as well as distinctions of the self and Other between social
groups. Risks may, therefore, not bear a direct relationship with any real dangers,
propensities or probabilities. Later, LASH (1993), in a critique of reflexive
modernisation, asserted that reflexivity is inevitably hermeneutic as well as
rationalistic, mediated through aesthetic understandings of social process that
may be influenced by other factors such as lifestyle and membership of sub
cultural groups. Most recently, TULLOCH and LUPTON (2003) have emphasised
the importance of "risk cultures" that take account of localised understandings of
risk, also challenging BECK's universal risk actor that operates without
consideration of factors such as age, gender, occupation, nationality and
sexuality. [7]

2. Research Approach

This project hypothesises that risk discourses may be heavily influenced by
difference and diversity; if substantiated this has important theoretical
implications, as well as fundamental policy implications. If adequate future
income protection for all sectors of society is an important goal then the realities
of different social groups need to be integrated into policy development. [8]

Existing research, mainly small scale, suggests that different groups are likely to
frame and respond to risks differently due to both cultural and lifestyle influences,
as well as barriers to the full range of income maintenance and income safety-net
strategies accessed by other "majority" groups in society. For example, religious
and cultural attitudes to money may lead to different approaches to financial
planning amongst some minority ethnic and faith groups, whilst low incomes may
also be a restriction for some groups (COLLARD et al. 2001; PILLEY 2003;
WHYLEY et al. 1997). Disabled people face particular risks and obstacles in
relation to financial planning given more limited access to the labour market than
their non-disabled peers and increased risk of experiencing poverty
(BURCHARDT 2003). Some disabled people, particularly those with learning
difficulties, may also be "protected" from making their own choices by the
intervention of others (ALASZEWSKI et al. 1999; SMALL et al. 2003). Gay men
and lesbians may face discrimination in accessing financial services as well as
within the workplace (COLLINSON 2003; KEOGH et al. 2004). It has also been
suggested that societal and family responses to being gay/lesbian may lead
people to place increased trust or reliance on friendship social networks
compared to family links (HEAPHY & YIP 2002). [9]

In the first stage of the study, four focus groups were convened in two areas of the UK (Bristol and Leeds) representing each of the four main elements of difference under study—a group of disabled people; people from different faiths; people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB), and; people from diverse Black and minority ethnic backgrounds (BME). Group members were recruited using a professional recruiting company, with quotas used to ensure approximately equal numbers of men and women, and respondents from different socio-economic backgrounds, were represented. A total of 49 people took part. [10]

Focus group participants were asked to discuss two closely related areas of their lives: firstly, their perceptions and experiences of the labour market including issues such as access to the job market, the nature of work and job security; secondly, participants were asked about financial planning generally but also specifically with respect to planning for job loss, including attitudes towards a range of public, private and alternative safety nets. Purposively, issues of difference were not the main focus of discussion (to illicit whether these issues arose naturally) although participants were aware that they had all been recruited because of their membership of a certain social group. [11]

Below, the findings from the focus groups are outlined, firstly with respect to experiences of the job market, followed by considerations of financial planning for job loss. The paper concludes by reflecting on the meaning of "difference" and its relevance to risk cultures and the risk society. [12]

3. Findings

3.1 Experiences of the labour market

Focus group participants were asked about the nature of local labour markets in Leeds and Bristol. The general perception among respondents in both cities was that there was plenty of employment available in certain sectors (for example, construction; call centres; caring and health services, and clerical work), with skill shortages in some areas (such as light engineering and traditional trades such as plumbing) partly as a result of more young people entering higher education. Respondents in both cities said that many businesses had moved to the city from London and this had created new employment opportunities but much of this represented a growth in part-time, low paid, flexible employment and what some described as "24/7" work. Coupled with a decline in manufacturing, dominance of the service sector, and the movement of some jobs to outside the UK, respondents' accounts of work fitted well with critiques of the labour market and the impact of globalisation. [13]

The requirements for staff to be increasingly "flexible" workers elicited strong views from participants, both for and against this trend depending on their household circumstances. The growth of part-time work and flexible working was welcomed by many as it allowed people with childcare or other caring commitments to enter employment. However, others felt that this flexibility was not necessarily extended to all employees. Some respondents in one of the

lesbian, gay and bisexual groups in particular, thought that they were treated unfairly compared with people who had children:

> R1: "I haven't got a problem with them making hours flexible for you [people with children] because that's fair enough, you need to work. But at the same time, just because I'm gay and have no children does not mean that I don't have commitments, but that's how they [employers] look at it ..."
>
> R2: "If you're gay, you're single so you have no life … So I end up with all the bad shifts." (LGB group) [14]

In addition, a few people said that there was sometimes a lack of understanding on the part of employees and colleagues about issues of difference in terms of flexibility of employment. In one of the faith groups for example, one person mentioned that her daughter had been made to work on Jewish New Year but others said that their employers had been understanding and flexible, allowing them to take days off for religious festivals, holy days and Sundays. [15]

Despite the apparent availability of jobs, those who had looked for employment recently said that it was not easy to find the work they wanted or to find employment that would fit with other commitments. One respondent suggested that people often tended to think there were more jobs available when they are not actually job-hunting themselves. Respondents were asked what, if any, barriers they perceived or had experienced in finding work. All groups concurred that the main barrier to getting a job were a lack of skills, qualifications, and experience, although some more senior managers commented that too much experience (coupled with older age and expectation of higher salary) also may not be attractive to employers.

> "I think every job you go for now … the first thing they'll say is 'experience' … even for some cleaning jobs, it's experience. And what experience do you need for a job like that?" (BME group) [16]

A number of other barriers to finding suitable work were raised, including finding appropriate childcare; the difficulties with the process of finding work ("not knowing where to start", impersonal interviews, needing to be "in the loop"); as well as problems of low pay and the benefit trap. Most barriers to accessing work were related to the general labour market and were not affected by difference. However, one group said that they had sometimes expected racist attitudes from employers and/or colleagues and one or two people thought that discrimination was an issue but none had experienced either racism or discrimination themselves. A few people thought that being in a minority gave them an advantage:

> "Well I've not come across any [discrimination] to be really honest. I mean if we go down that sort of ethnicity route if anything I think that being a black woman has probably been an advantage rather than a disadvantage … it's a bonus for the

company or whatever to think 'okay, we are heading towards whatever goals or
targets we need'." (BME group) [17]

Only one group of respondents said that discrimination because of difference was
a real problem when seeking employment. This group of people with physical
impairments felt that the labour market was hostile towards disabled people:

"I think the trouble is in this country that disability's been … a massive stigma
attached to it. People forget that disabled people, the majority of disabled people,
have a brain … they think 'oh' you know 'They're not bothered'. But they don't realise
that your brain is still working—my brain is still working." (Disability group) [18]

3.2 Job security

In common with other research findings (QUILGARS & ABBOTT 2000;
TULLOCH & LUPTON 2003), respondents generally agreed that there was no
such thing as a job for life anymore; that there was "no tenure" these days and
that employers had little or no loyalty towards their employees. People mentioned
restructuring and contracting out, competition from abroad and the need for
employers to maximise profits. Although part-time, flexible and casual employ-
ment was seen as the least secure type of work, most people were aware that
well-established companies and public sector employers, for example, local
government, and the NHS, had gone through some form of re-organisation or were
planning to restructure the organisation. [19]

However, despite the above critique of the labour market, only a few people said
that they felt very insecure in their current job. Of those that did, three were on
short-term contracts or in casual part-time work. One respondent was a
seamstress who worried about the effect of competition from abroad. Another
was a worker in the building trade, however, he said that this was the nature of
building work and he felt confident that he would have no trouble finding another
job quickly. Other respondents who said that they felt secure explained that they
did not necessarily feel secure in their current position but that they felt secure in
the knowledge that their skills, qualifications and experience would enable them
to find alternative employment. This accorded with previous findings on
perceptions of risk in the labour market that people can feel "work secure" within
a flexible labour market (QUILGARS & ABBOTT 2000).

"I think the reason why it [insecurity] doesn't affect me too much is because I am in a
nursing profession. I will always have a job. Maybe not with the same company but I
will always have a job. I can go into any nursing home or a hospital, and I know that
with what I have, my qualifications and experience, I can get a job anywhere." (LGB
group) [20]

A number of public sector employees said that although they did not feel as
secure as they used to they thought that being on a permanent contract offered
them a degree of security. Even when people described their job as secure they
went on to add that one could never be sure these days:

> "The civil service is secure. So that is why I will jump from department to department rather than venture outside. It's got a pension, it's secure … But then, who knows, anything could happen. You think you are secure but then the government could say —they are saying that a department is losing so many jobs. But who knows?" (BME group) [21]

Most people thought that they could quite easily lose their jobs if the company failed or if their employer decided to reduce the workforce. Respondents also felt that employers demanded more for their money and that they had to perform well if they were to have any security. Many people said they felt under pressure to work different shifts, to work overtime for no extra money, to change working practices and to learn new skills. Despite this, some respondents felt that seniority and experience may put them at increased risk of redundancy:

> "There's a lot of pressure in the job I have … I think I could very easily be replaced … I'm sure that they value the work I do but if my standard of work dropped for any reason they wouldn't hesitate … their main thing is the money. I come secondary as a person." (Faith group) [22]

Very few respondents believed that difference had any impact on their job security, however this was raised as a potential issue in the two sexuality focus groups. Some lesbian, gay and bisexual focus group participants said that they had not "come out" at work, partly because they did not want to cause any conflict but also because they saw no reason to do so. Most people thought that their employers and colleagues would be supportive and this was the case for most of those who had "come out" at work. However, three respondents said they had experienced bullying or harassment in the workplace which they believed to be related to difference. One woman explained that she had been "picked on" by senior staff because of her appearance and her reluctance to wear a dress for work:

> "I had to go to occupational health and be assessed by a doctor who laughed because he couldn't grasp the fact that I feel like a man in drag if I put on a dress ... and then he asked me if I wanted a sex change. I said no, I just want to wear trousers ... They actually tried to push me out of my job because of it ... You find that they can discriminate against you in lots of different ways. You're not allowed to say it verbally anymore so what they do is pick on other issues to try and get you out. They either break you down or they find other ways to sack you." (LGB group) [23]

In addition, one man had left his job in a factory because of bullying and taunts about his sexuality, he returned to work there some years later but the bullying continued and he was forced to leave for a second time. In these two examples, the respondents did not appear to receive support from their employers. In a third case, a lesbian woman had been spat at but the employer acted swiftly by suspending the person concerned. The extent to which harassment can lead to someone feeling insecure in their job therefore was related to whether this was institutionalised / accepted within the work culture or not, but for a minority it was clear that difference could lead to a feeling of precariousness in the labour market. [24]

3.3 Responses to the risk of unemployment

This section considers participants' responses to the risk of unemployment, firstly
whether this risk was something that people actively considered on a day-to-day
level; secondly, whether once recognised, they planned for this risk, and finally,
but crucially, how people explained why they planned or not and whether
difference influenced this process. [25]

3.3.1 Did people think about insecurity?

Despite an awareness of job insecurity, very few respondents said that they
actively worried about losing their jobs although a handful said that they had
thought about the prospect of being unemployed or unable to work. Whilst most
people said that it would be very difficult to manage, especially if you had a
mortgage and a family, there was a general feeling was that there was no point in
worrying about something they had little or no control over: "I don't worry about it,
if it happens, it happens. I won't sit and start thinking 'Oh my god, if I lost my job'
…" (Faith group). [26]

The one group that said they worried about becoming unemployed or being
unable to work was a group of disabled people. This group said they worried
about losing their own jobs and that the worry increased with age and as financial
commitments—including having children—increased. Women in this group also
said that they worried about their male partners losing their job. [27]

3.3.2 Planning

Participants were asked if they planned for the possibility of them losing their jobs
either through redundancy or becoming too ill to work (temporarily or longer
term). On the whole, people thought that it was difficult to plan ahead although it
was clear from responses that most people had thought about the issue. People
thought that it was a "good idea" to plan for the future but that not having enough
money to meet competing demands made it difficult to save or plan: "You can't
plan ahead … you live basically for the week." (BME group) [28]

People did not focus particularly on the relationship between planning per se and
planning for unemployment. As previous research suggested (QUILGARS &
ABBOTT 2000), planning for unemployment was not at the top of people's
"hierarchy" of risk:

> "I'm a bit of an ostrich, I stick my head in the sand and think, well if it happened I'd
> have to deal with it there and then, but I've got too many other things to think about,
> worry about, than thinking about if only's and what if and this, so no, my job doesn't
> come in ... that part of it doesn't come into my life …" (LGB group) [29]

Instead, people made more general statements about being able or unable to
plan for a range of different scenarios—for the future, a future which contained

any number of possible positive or negative outcomes and choices. Planning
strategies were for things other than job loss:

> R1: "I think I've got a savings policy, and I've got a pension plan, but they're not in
> case I lose my job."

> R2: "They are for the future, aren't they, for retirement and as a rainy day fund. But all
> my savings and things like that are for the future, for retirement, they're not in case I
> lose my job." (LGB group) [30]

Most people said that their plan if they lost their job would be to get another job,
fitting in with their views of the availability of "work" discussed above. Few people
in most groups had thought about the difficulties they would face if they were
unable to work through poor or declining health; there was an implicit assumption
that the risk of losing one's job was due to unemployment. However, in sharp
contrast, health and work were very much linked in the disability focus group. [31]

Respondents were asked about what different types of strategies they had
considered or adopted. Savings, insurance and pensions were the planning
strategies discussed most often, unprompted. In addition, respondents were
asked about their views on the role of benefits, relying on family or friends or
community resources. [32]

3.3.3 Saving

Although saving was discussed as a possible strategy, only a small number of
participants managed to save on a regular basis. Those with children found it
harder to save and imagined that single people with children would find it easier
to save:

> R1: "If you've got a family, you don't put, it's very hard to put it aside. There's always
> something that they want, or they need I should say …"

> R2: "I think if you're single and you've got a good job, then obviously you can save
> and put some money away." (BME group) [33]

However, single respondents without children also said they found it difficult to
save, either because they did not have enough income left after meeting
essential bills, or because they preferred to "live for the moment" as opposed to
saving for the future. [34]

Examples of savings included three members of the Bristol gay, lesbian and
bisexual group who said that they saved regularly, including using standing
orders to transfer a set sum of money to a savings account each month. A
disabled man in Leeds had saved enough money from his earnings as a taxi
driver to pay off his mortgage. A number of people in these respective focus
groups tended to admire these achievements even if they could not manage to
save themselves:

"I think nowadays it's quite difficult to plan for those kind of things. It's difficult to, I mean, I take my hat off to anybody that puts away savings every month. I think that's good if you can do it because I just don't think I've ever done it. I think it's so hard to put away savings". (Disability group) [35]

Overall, those that were able to save tended to save quite small amounts of money. For example, two people in a group of Black and minority ethnic people said that they took part in a savings scheme with friends whereby each person in the group put an amount of money in a pot each week or month and then took it in turns to keep the money. Several people talked about the "three months salary safety net" but nobody said that they had achieved this:

"I tend to read magazines about money and what you should do and I remember reading years ago that you should have at least three months salary put aside, and I was thinking, 'How can I get to that?' But I save a little bit every month and just put that away." (BME group) [36]

3.3.4 Insurance

Focus group respondents mentioned insurance quite frequently in discussion but it was rarely related to insurance to cover income in the event of job loss or ill health. Life assurance policies were much more common. Four people talked about having insurance to protect their income in the event of being unable to work: a self-employed gay man, a female Muslim restaurant manger, a male Christian engineer and a self-employed, Jewish woman. Interestingly, whilst people did not generally think that they would become unwell, all four policies covered people for ill health rather than unemployment. Overall, there was a scepticism about the value of insurance in all groups, with a couple of people that had policies agreeing that they were unsure what would happen if they needed to make a claim:

"I've got like a three way plan, it is critical illness, accident and something else—disability. To be honest I hope to God I don't have to claim on it because I don't think it would turn out to be worth the paper it is written on." (Faith group) [37]

Members of the disability focus groups explained that they were unable to access insurance to cover their income in the event of becoming too disabled to work. There was a sense that deteriorating health was very difficult to plan ahead for. A self-employed, book-keeper explained:

"If you look into insurance, or even sick insurance, how can I put it? You know, like the pre-existing conditions, you're not gonna be, you're not, it's not worth it for you to take out that insurance. Obviously then you know, if it comes to the stage where, you know, your illness is on top of you, you're then possibly off work, your work's only going to pay sick pay for so long, I think that's the time when you start worrying about it more, than if you're healthy, you know." (Disability group) [38]

3.3.5 Pensions

Several people spoke about pensions at the point at which they were asked about
planning for unemployment. This indicates that again, people see the risk to their
income as in the future—when they stop working at retirement age, rather than
an imminent risk due to unemployment or poor health. It may be that participants
were responding to the heightened awareness and media coverage of pension
shortfalls. Private, personal and stakeholder pensions were discussed in most
groups and, with the exception of a few public sector or utility schemes, were
generally regarded as not offering financial security because they could not be
trusted to deliver an adequate income in retirement. [39]

3.3.6 Benefits

Only a few people mentioned social security benefits as part of any plan to deal
with unemployment. Knowledge of benefits was generally poor but despite an
acknowledgement by some of the benefits of tax credits, most felt that this would
not represent an effective planning strategy. There was also a belief that state
support was likely to erode further in the future.

> R1: "You'd have to rely on state benefits, which I don't even know what they are …"
>
> R2: "No, because you are really just existing really. You can't live on that." (BME
> group) [40]

Only a small number of people thought that they would claim social security
benefits if they actually lost their jobs and even then, claiming was described as a
"last resort":

> "I think I'd just take any job. Rather than do that [signing on]. As long as I'm not sick, I
> don't care, I'd do cleaning, I'd do anything, I'd do four jobs rather than sign on. I'm not
> doing it—unless like I said I was sick—obviously I'd have to do it, but I'm not doing it
> otherwise." (BME group) [41]

There was also a shared view in several groups that social security benefits were
difficult to claim, not available to people who had been self-employed, and more
available to people who had rarely if ever worked in comparison to people who
had worked for most of their lives and/or who had savings. A few people in one of
the lesbian, gay and bisexual groups also pointed out that they felt it was unfair
(on principle not necessarily financially) that they were not treated as a
partnership or family unit. [42]

3.3.7 Other income sources

There were a number of other strategies discussed in relation to planning for the
event of job loss by one or two people. For example, having and buying property,
as well as releasing equity in properties, was seen as a possible fall-back in the

event of loss of work as well as for retirement. One disabled man said that he had
taken a second job as his "fall-back plan":

> "And I think as you get older, I always like to have summat to fall back on, you know,
> because you never know, you could just lose your job or anything could happen."
> (Disability group) [43]

3.3.8 Family and community supports

A number of people explained that their main financial support was in the form of
their partner and/or parents and other family members. This was the case irres-
pective of difference. Where a partner was in work, there was the safety of know-
ing there would at least be one income if someone lost their job. However it was
recognised that this could place a strain on the relationship. In a couple of cases,
parents had left people money or had invested money for their children. More
generally, people felt that they could rely on their family for in-kind support. [44]

Only respondents in one of the faith groups mentioned the potential of support as
a result of social group membership. It was pointed out that churches, mosques
and temples often provided free food for worshippers and/or people in need and
one Christian woman explained that her church had been very supportive in hard
times. However, another Christian wondered what capacity churches had to really
help with people in significant difficulties:

> "The trouble is, I have to admit, I'm involved with the church but it's a very different
> thing going and saying, 'Have you got enough money for my grocery shop and can
> you pay my mortgage for three months?' There's a difference isn't there?" (Faith
> group) [45]

3.3.9 Influences on planning strategies

Focus group respondents were asked to reflect on possible factors that affected
their approach to planning. Many respondents tended to think that childhood
experiences, particularly of poverty and hardship, had an effect on how people
thought about planning and money in adulthood. For example, one woman who
had grown up poor explained:

> "I've seen the hard times you know … I mean I'm not a Scrooge or anything like that.
> If I can save, I'll save … and it's been, not drilled into me, but I've seen it you see …
> and basically I've done well out of it, because it has taught me a lot you know." (BME
> group) [46]

Children were cited as a reason both for planning and not planning: as a reason
to plan because of the perceived cost of their future education and because it
meant that parents felt responsible about being financially secure—and a reason
not to plan because of the expense associated with having children. [47]

Several people talked about "living in the moment" as an alternative frame of mind which meant that they tended not to make plans for the future:

> "I tend to live for now, you know, rather than later, you know. I suppose other people who, other people who do save live for the future rather than now, you know." (Disability group) [48]

Two gay men in the Bristol group talked about the "peer pressure" to be financially secure and to be able to maintain a certain type of lifestyle into retirement. However, more generally, despite many people wanting to live for the moment, it was felt that there was a general societal pressure to be responsible for your future. Messages from the government and media did make people feel that there was an expectation that they should plan, even if they felt that the realities did not make this so easy, or they chose to ignore these messages:

> "… society expects you to have a pension and have your mortgage paid off by the time you retire. And the lifestyle, we want the lifestyle but society sort of drags you … I mean you're constantly bombarded with 'get this pension, have you got enough?' And everyone's worrying you by saying, 'Have you got an endowment that's not going to pay out?' You know I mean, it's just society." (LGB group) [49]

There was also a perception that there was a generational factor operating here —with people of broad middle age having different attitudes to the younger generation who were perceived to be more irresponsible and less likely to plan ahead. (Despite recent empirical research that shows that young people save a higher proportion of their income than older cohorts (NATIONAL SAVINGS AND INVESTMENTS 2004)). [50]

However, it appeared that societal pressures were sometimes conflicting or difficult to interpret, for example, several people also felt that they might be penalised by the Government in their old age if they did save and plan as they would no longer qualify for support. In addition, more current influences included a pressure to "consume", too much information, as well as a lack of trust in financial products:

> "… every day it is something new. Like now they are asking people to buy their pensions ... I mean there's no independent body monitoring what is going on and everybody lies, and unfortunately lots of people are vulnerable. Either you get a state pension or you get state plus your company pension. And that's what you've got to live with. But unfortunately every day you see something ... So we start living for today instead of tomorrow. And that's really what—unless you have a good mentality and a lot of control of your spending, you can't plan your future, it is very hard." (BME group) [51]

3.3.10 Does difference affect planning?

Whilst the above issues predominated discussions of planning, difference was an
issue for some respondents, although the extent of its significance differed
considerably by group. [52]

Respondents from Black and minority ethnic groups did not tend to perceive that
there was a link between ethnicity and approaches to risk and financial planning.
For example, people in the Leeds BME group talked about family but without
reference to ethnicity or culture. For a few people, faith and culture however
tended to inter-link and influence attitudes to money and family support. A self-
employed Hindu woman explained:

> "I'm, we believe in Hindu, our religion and the way we are brought up we are, as we
> get older, we are supposed to look after our in-laws and parents and that burden falls
> on us. And you know, money does make a difference and we do worry about it you
> know ... It's not as easy for me to put my mum in a home ... that would be so difficult.
> So, you know, as we get older all that falls on us ... I worry about not having a job,
> being unemployed and stuff like that." (Faith group) [53]

Similarly, a Christian woman and Muslim man both said that they put their faith in
God when it came to matters like this:

> R1: "Well me being a Christian actually 'Lord please keep me in work', you know. And
> I don't say that lightly. Every wage packet I get is a blessing, it literally is a blessing.
> Because the department could close tomorrow, you know, we'd all be out of work,
> you know."
> R2: "For myself, I mean all you need is faith." (Faith group) [54]

The other group who made the most explicit links between their "social/cultural
grouping" and planning were the group of disabled people who felt that their
choices were extremely narrowed by their exclusion from most pension and
insurance options:

> R1: "I tried looking into like a private pension where as soon as I put down what's
> wrong with me, they'll say, or they just, these adverts that are on telly, 'You don't need
> a medical'. So you send back the forms, so by the time you've put 'yes' to all these,
> they write back and say, 'I'm sorry, but you're not well enough'."
> R2: "Or they load it, they load the premium." (Disability group) [55]

However, respondents in the two lesbian, gay and bisexual groups were quite
adamant that there was absolutely no link, either culturally or in terms of access
to finance, between their sexuality and their views and behaviour around planning
and financial risk:

I: "And if we were to ask, does whether you plan or you don't plan, is it influenced at all by your sexuality?"

R1: "No."

R2: "No."

I: "Does that question make any sense?"

R1: "No."

R3: "No, it's a fallacy about gay men being like loads of money. Do you know what I mean? Not all are, do you know what I mean, but it's a fallacy like gay people have got so much money, cos like they haven't got families and kids and everything, it's just ridiculous."

R4: "That's crap."

R3: "It is, isn't it? You know."

R2: "That's the first time I've heard that ... "

R1: "I don't think it ... whether I was gay or not I think still my brain would have said the same thing, you know."

R5: "I don't think it's got any, it doesn't matter. Whether I was married, gay, whatever, single, I'd still be thinking you know I'd like a pension, I need security, whatever." (LGB group) [56]

Members of same group went on to say that they did not see "group membership" affecting their choices, rather that they would make decisions based on individual experience:

R1: "I don't see how, 'Well I'm gay, shall I do this today?' I just do it, cos it's logical. I want to do it and I feel 'That's a good idea.'"

R2: "I think it's down to the individual person. We're all individuals right, in this room, and I think it's down to your own mentality. If you want to save you'll save. If you don't, you spend."

R3: "I think it's more life experience that moulds you into what you are and what you're going to be. Not a group or what you are. It's just what you've been through and what's happened."

R2: "I still think it's down to your individual self." (LGB group) [57]

4. Conclusions: How influential is difference?

Overall, respondents' views and experiences of the labour market in Leeds and Bristol were very similar to previous studies that did not take account of difference (QUILGARS & ABBOTT 2000). Most people described an increasingly risky labour market, characterised by flexible working patterns, disappearance of a "job for life" and competition nationally and internationally. Just occasionally however respondents pointed out that flexibility in the workforce worked better for some types of employees than others, for example, observance of religious holidays were not always recognised adequately. [58]

Similarly, when discussing the process of finding and keeping work, respondents tended towards a consensual approach, identifying universal concerns with the current labour market. A range of problems were perceived as barriers to entering suitable employment (particularly experience and skills) that were likely to affect most workers. Respondents did differ in the extent to which they felt secure in employment, although even here the key themes were that "work" rather than "job" security was common for many, and no-one felt totally secure "these days". Overall, difference was not something that most respondents felt was significant in their experience of work, however there were two important exceptions to this. Firstly, disabled respondents explained that they continued to experience barriers to entering work due to employer inflexibility and discrimination. Secondly, three lesbian, gay or bisexual respondents explained that they had experienced bullying or harassment in the workplace—in two of these cases, this was institutionalised and impacted on job security. [59]

Most focus group respondents explained that they did not tend to actively worry about losing their job, although it is important to note the fieldwork took place at a time of near full employment. In particular, most people found it hard to consider that they could lose their job through ill-health, with the exception of people in the disability focus groups who were very concerned about a possible future inability to work and their precarious position in the labour market. The need to plan for the future was something that most respondents were conscious of and had considered but mainly with respect to retirement or death, not an inability to work. Respondents discussed a full range of possible planning strategies but there was an overriding sense that most of these were likely to be relatively ineffective: it was not possible to save enough, insurance may not pay out, pensions were important but precarious, and benefits would not protect. People did not describe rational "strategies", rather a patchwork of partial cover from a varying number of sources. [60]

Decisions as to how to plan seemed to be influenced by a myriad of factors, drawn from individual experiences, dispositions towards living for the present or the future, with constraints or possibilities also strongly dictated by income levels and position in the labour market. Participants felt that sexuality had no influence on financial planning. Ethnicity and faith issues occasionally were felt to have an influence in the form of family and cultural expectations, as well as values and sense of security. For disabled people, the main influence of difference was in their exclusion from financial products. However, whilst social group membership differed in significance across groups, participants' framing of risk was heavily influenced by broader societal trends and cultural norms. Whilst people were aware of expectations to behave in a certain way, they interpreted these societal messages through a cultural kaleidoscope, producing a shifting patterning of risk responses, and one also fundamentally structured by access to financial resources. [61]

This preliminary empirical work suggests that whilst the risk society thesis may partially explain the framing of risk, it poorly predicts risk responses. Participants were not responding as highly reflexive, informed consumers, rather more as

muddled, complex observers. Theories of risk cultures were more helpful in explaining behaviour, taking account of the way people interpret information (LASH 1994) within both their own, and broader, social and cultural positions. However, as observed by TULLOCH and LUPTON (2003), it remains unclear as to how the varying aspects of people's lives, including both difference and structural positions, overlap and inter-link to produce particular risk responses. The main stage of this project will aim to assist in the identification of these "shifting and multiple risk cultures'". This remains absolutely crucial in order to clarify the limitations of relying on the "rational" actor model in public policy making (see HALPERN et al. 2004). [62]

Acknowledgements

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