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The social construction of risk by young people

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The Social Construction of Risk by Young People

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of a widely accepted risk discourse. This discussion presents a range of data which aims to highlight weaknesses in the widespread application of the 'Risk Society' thesis (Beck 1992). This paper uses the lives of young people as a context specific example. This selection of quantitative and qualitative data, taken from a school based case study, is juxtaposed against theoretical reasoning throughout this paper.   Three main assumptions made by the 'Risk Society' thesis are critiqued using this empirical data; 1) risk is a negative concept, 2) risk is aligned with uncertainty and worry, and 3) those living in the 'Risk Society' have become sceptical of expert opinions. The conclusion suggests that by using pockets of mixed methodology the extensive acceptance of the 'Risk Society' thesis can be critiqued. By stimulating this debate it becomes clear that each of the individual criticisms need further research. This paper provides a platform for future empirical work which would look to strengthen the social constructionist framework involved in an appreciation of risk, moving away from the recent trend in grand risk theorising, to context specific data collection and explanation.

The Social Construction of Risk by Young People

Introduction

The discerning characteristics of the contemporary era have been abstractly theorised and critiqued for nearly twenty years. Such diversity of interpretation within the current sociological literature brings an opportunity for researchers in a variety of fields to relate their chosen subject to the wider conditions of social change. Thus, the writings of prominent authors such as Ulrich Beck (1992, 1999) now appear in academic papers of diverse and numerous genres[i]. However, the applicability of such discourses to specific individuals and social groups requires further research, not simply at the theoretical level, but with regard to the lived experiences of those theorised about. Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that there is a need for researchers to provide empirical grounding for these largely unempirical theories (Mythen & Walklate 2006b).

The main aim of this paper is to provide empirical foundation to the theoretical reasoning of the 'Risk Society'. Specifically; are the assumptions made about living at risk and risk taking apparent in the perceptions of young people? Is there evidence to suggest that young people live in a 'Risk Society'? There are three specific assumptions made by Beck that have been chosen to provide the focus of this paper; 1) risk is a negative concept, 2) risk is aligned with uncertainty and worry, and 3) those living in the 'Risk Society' have become sceptical of expert opinions. This paper provides brief acknowledgement of the theoretical assumptions of Beck and colleagues, whilst suggesting that the need to repeat in detail such well known accounts is unnecessary. Instead, evidence will be presented from a mixed method case study sample of empirical data collected throughout 2003/2004. This data (using various adolescent activities as examples) will raise questions surrounding the applicability of the 'Risk Society' thesis and realist appreciation of risk to the lived experiences and perceptions of a sample of young people. Conclusions will then be drawn on the relationship between theoretical discourse and lived experiences in this given sample and projected on to future discussions.

Background

The concept of risk has become a central characteristic of contemporary society and the writing on high/late modernity. As Beck's 'Risk Society' thesis suggests 'risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with the hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself' (1992: 21). To put it as simply as Young (2007: 59) we now live in a society where 'anything might happen'. As the dominance of risk discourses specific to science and technology (as Beck begins) filter into the public domain (predominantly via the media, Furedi 1997) the preoccupation with this concept widens. Such a preoccupation now stretches in breadth to include associated concepts (hazard, fear, harm, uncertainty; concepts used now interchangeably, Chadee, Austen, Ditton 2006) and diversifies into most areas of social life. Thus,

> today's increased concern with safety and risk has little to do with the advance of technology and science. After all, it is not just the outcome of technological and scientific developments which provokes anxiety and fear.
>
> (Furedi 1997: 7)

The apparent realist position of Beck would seem to place risks and hazards at odds with subjective feelings of anxiety and fear. This contradiction, noted by Beck himself, (Flynn 2006) highlights the directions of alternative risk theorists, such as Mary Douglas et al (1966, 1980, 1992) who promote the appreciation of socially constructed risk agendas. Furthermore, there are those who suggest that the separation of actual (objective) and appraised (subjective/perceived) risk is 'illusionary' (Chadee, Austen, Ditton 2006). Therefore, by accepting this premise, it is the social construction of living at risk and taking risks which becomes the focus for investigation.

The apparent risk-chic environment has become more diverse, not just as part of our everyday lives, but embedded within political rhetoric and policy initiatives. Grand theories on the topic of risk have infiltrated many discourses of which the risk management of young people is one example. In the years since the 'Risk Society' thesis was delivered its influence on late modern theorising is to be admired. However, in recent years scholars have become critical of the dominance and use of this thesis (Mythen & Walklate 2006) and ultimately the supposition that it encapsulates the sentiments and experiences of all.

In response to this critical reaction, this paper focuses on the applicability of the 'Risk Society' thesis to the lives of young people. For this approach a literal appreciation of the key texts of these theorists is not sufficient and broader interpretations (such as Furedi's above) are required. Whereas both Beck and Giddens link the preoccupation with risk to a decline in the conditions of modernity specific to technological change, Jackson and Scott suggest 'that the anxieties specific to childhood are part of a general sense that the social world in itself is becoming less stable and predictable' (1999: 88). What distinguishes this period of social change from previous eras is the diversity of risk applicability. Beck himself acknowledges that risk is not a new concept. However, the social conditions in which risk occurs have changed dramatically to the point that risk 'endangers all forms of life' (1992: 21).

In response to the perception of living at risk, risk taking (where risk is perceived by both the risk taker and the observer) was once necessary for survival. Now risk taking is much more diverse, not centred on survival but pleasure and the relief of boredom. In this sense risk taking is now regarded as fun, a way of coping with the increased instabilities and uncertainties of living at risk. As Lupton (1999: 115) suggests 'young people now, compared with 20 or 30 years ago, are faced with a greater range of uncertainties and choices to make about how to conduct their lives'. This consideration identifies the notion of being 'at risk' ('uncertainties') and 'risk taking' ('choices') during childhood. The contradiction that this highlights is the reflection of young people 'as active, knowing autonomous individuals on the one hand and as passive, innocent dependents on the other' (Jackson & Scott 1999:91). This paper attempts to critique the 'Risk Society' thesis in consideration of this contradiction.

Contextualising the risk debate

The literature discussed in this section is organised around the paper's three central themes; 1) risk is a negative concept, 2) risk is aligned with uncertainty and worry, and 3) those living in the 'Risk Society' have become sceptical of expert opinions.

Probably originating from the Spanish maritime word meaning 'to run into danger on a rock', the

term risk first appeared in the English language in the seventeenth century (Giddens 1990: 30). Furthermore, historians also relate the traditional use of the term to the religious notion of sin and an explanation of misfortune (Luhmann 1993: 8). The incline towards negative consequences, distinguishes a specifically biased outcome (Furedi 1997: 57). Adams' particular description of risk highlights the creation of such via a mathematical calculation.

> a numerical measure of expected harm or loss associated with an adverse event…the integrated product of risk and harm is often expressed in terms such as cost in pounds, loss in expected years of life or loss of productivity.
>
> (Adams 1995: 8)

In light of such biased definitions, it is unsurprising that a society preoccupied with risk should be theorised by Beck in such a negative light suggesting 'one is no longer concerned with attaining something good, but rather with preventing the worst (Beck 1992: 49).

As Wilkinson suggests 'he [Beck] seeks to draw a firm analytical distinction between an industrial society which was hitherto blind to the uninsurable risks of modernisation, and an emergent 'Risk Society' which is being forced to negotiate with a future which imposes the threat of self-annihilation upon our lives' (1997: 3).

There are those who have chosen a distinctly different interpretation, opting instead to reflect on risk as the 'double edged character of society' (Giddens 1990: 7), in which a world enriched with opportunities can also harbour danger and insecurity. Or rather there are those academics, such as Wildavsky who simply state that the negative assumptions of Beck are exaggerated or not evidenced (Adams 1995: 195). This most prominent criticism stems from the over-interpretation of the negativity of risk, in a thesis which repeatedly stresses danger, harm and uncertainty. It is to this extent that Adams reflects on such work as 'one-sided' in favour of 'its doom-laden view' (1995: 182).

Adhering to this distinctive approach the suggestion of Short (1984: 711) seems appropriate; that the definition of risk need not be negative so that 'a more neutral definition simply specifies that risk is the probability of some future event'. Does it follow then that society has adopted Beck's pessimism and has a distinctly negative connotation of risk? Lupton suggests that the negative relationship between risk and pleasure can be conceptualised by the response of academic literature and expert opinion, and that of popular culture (1999: 149).

> To take unnecessary risks is commonly seen as foolhardy, careless, irresponsible, and even 'deviant', evidence of an individual's ignorance or lack of ability to regulate self.
>
> (Lupton 1999: 149)

Academic discourse and theoretical debate in the 1960s and 1970s did much to strengthen this negative image, specifically using the phrase 'problem behaviour' to relate to concepts now aligned with the term risk.[ii] For example, Goffman conceptualised such behaviour as 'action, consequential for the individual, that has problematic outcomes, and that is undertaken for its own sake' (1967 cited in Lyng 1990: 862). Examples used include 'high risk occupations and leisure activities, combat experience, drug use and the like' (ibid). The media also play a significant role in the problematisation and demonisation of youth, by which many in society equate 'problem youth' with drugs, alcohol, violence and anti social behaviour (Miles 2000: 71). The media are challenged for creating 'youth' at a time of negative behaviour, and young people, particularly

young males (Pearson 1994 in Croall 1998: 132, Loader 1996: 24), are often stereotyped as doing the same. Thus it is noted that is many situations 'to be young in itself constituted a reason for being regarded as one of the 'usual suspects' (Pearson 1994 in Croall 1998: 123).

In recent years some risk researchers have started to acknowledge a division. For example, Benthin et al. (1993), separate their list of adolescent activities into 'problem behaviours' (such as drugs, alcohol, binge eating, and sex) and 'other behaviours' (riding motorcycles and bicycles, skiing and sunbathing), which shows at least an acknowledgement of a possible distinction. However, the preoccupation within risk discourse with the 'governance of risk' (Rothstein 2006) has meant that the terminology is now applied to most spheres of daily life, including the full range of children's daily 'play' and outdoor activities (Jenkins 2006). Thus, although academia is starting to acknowledge the functions of adolescent risk taking (see Parker and Stanworth 2005), or potential problems of over-regulating 'exposure to adversity' (Jenkins 2006: 380), it may be overshadowed by the perceptions of the lay population.

The negativity of the 'Risk Society' suggests that society is inherently worried about the proliferation and negotiation of 'actual' risks. Such an outlook aligned with 'preventing the worst', stressed by the discussion on the negativity of risk, is now an accepted part of contemporary society. If we think negatively, or that the worst could happen, then it follows that we become anxious. The presentation of risk information, predominantly via media discourse, has been criticised for promoting negativity and contributing to an increased sense of anxiety. The influential work of Kasperson et al. regards this situation as the 'social amplification of risk', providing an account for how expert risk assessment can be amplified[iii] within society (Kasperson et. al 2003: 15).

> Such transformations can increase (…) the volume of information about an event, heighten the salience of certain aspects of a message, or reinterpret and elaborate the available symbols and images, thereby leading to particular interpretations and responses by other participants in the social system.

This most common association with amplified anxiety or worry in contemporary society is the emotive response of fear.

> The promotion of fear and the propagandist manipulation of information is often justified on the grounds that it is a small price to pay to get a message across to the public …rather than provide people with the information to make an informed choice, everyone is warned that they are at risk.
>
> (Furedi 1997: 25)

The above rationale applies to young people who must be, and are, educated about the risks inherent to their life stage. There are essentially more risks applicable to them, thus the intensity of education is much greater, and stems from a variety of sources. But does if follow then that such anxiety or worry is found within the younger generation? This question will be directly addressed by the findings presented in this paper.

Integral to the negotiation of risk is society's debated exposure to hazards, and a feeling that "suddenly everything becomes uncertain" (Beck 1992: 109). Uncertainty can be understood as the cause of worry, coupled with negative thinking. Uncertainty creates feelings of worry via the thought that the outcomes of hazards are unknown, coupled with the preoccupation that these

outcomes will be predominantly negative. Marris (1996) suggested that the way society deals with uncertainty is to constantly search for answers (knowledge) not just from our own private emotions, but within the public sphere (health warnings etc). Such a search for information helps us deal with possibly uncertain consequences. Considering notions of calculation and probability, Marris also suggests that however small or large, the notion of uncertainty is always uncomfortable. It is not unsurprising then that Burgess notes 'the sociological interest in mistrust and uncertainty appears in much contemporary risk analysis and has been absorbed into the language of official scientific reports and institutions' (2006: 332). In a society which is preoccupied with risk, the discourse of risk information creates a considerable challenge for the lay person. Which risks should we take, which should we avoid, who is presenting the 'facts', and who is going to protect my interests? Beck's conclusion to such questioning is a state of anxiety, scepticism of expert opinion, and diminished trust in both professionals and established institutions (1992). Given that the 'Risk Society' stresses the negativity of risk situations, it follows that we would critique our risk knowledge and ask; how certain are we that we know the worst that could happen?

Experts, and expert systems, whether labelled or socially constructed, are synonymous with ideas of knowledge, skills, problem solving and application. The perspective of the experts when it comes to risk is often taken at its word, reinforced by statistical assessments. The layperson, without the means of actuarial investigation, is led to believe the 'actual' risks involved in for example, smoking, drinking and drug use. As Lupton comments "in the 'Risk Society', the assessment of risk is subject to a high degree of ambivalence, due to the complexity of scientific and technical knowledge" (1999: 64).

> It is hardly surprising, given the tensions between protecting children and permitting their autonomy, that parents should look to 'experts' for a set of rules which, having external authority, may lend a sense of certainty to decisions parents make…Such guidelines tend to bureaucratise decisions in relation to children, producing standardised responses without regard for the social context or life experience of individual children.
>
> (Jackson & Scott 1999: 94)

However, studies involving the psychometric paradigm show that 'ordinary people…use a broader definition of 'risks' than experts when making judgements about which ones are of most concern to them' (Marris 1997). Experts rely on statistics such as fatalities whilst lay people consider a host of qualitative characteristics. Yet we seem to have a reliance on this expert knowledge, even if our judgement, and more importantly our experience, tells us otherwise.

Natalier (2001) claims Beck and Giddens argue that 'we live in an age where we rely on experts to manage and make sense of risks that are unknowable through lay knowledge' (2001: 66). And yet, as Giddens (1990: 91) proposes, experts in many fields, (including health and safety policy) continue to fail to control and regulate the possibility of negative outcomes. Due to expert disagreements, resulting in a loss of authority, society begins to question the validity of assessments, a concept Giddens referred to as 'doubt' (1991: 3). Doubt, Giddens suggests, leads to contestability, revision and possibly abandonment. Consequently, knowledge overlaps with experience as people, especially adolescents, accept these warnings but search for their own alternative knowledge base – that of trial, and possibly error. In many cases as Luhmann (1979 in Boyne 2003: 86) suggests, trust, rather than dealing with the complexities of mistrust, is the easier option. How does one cope with the insecurities of the 'Risk Society', coupled with the

impossibility of analysing every shred of information? The answer is we couldn't and we don't. Therefore such management demands that all our relationships (with individuals or systems) start with trust (*ibid.*), a concept which is debated specifically by Beck's social theory.

Methodology

The criticism often levelled at Beck and other social theorists writing on the subject of risk, is that such theorising lacks empirical evidence (Dingwall 1999, Burgess 2006, Jenkins 2006). This study specifically attempts to use primary data to discuss the applicability of the 'Risk Society' thesis to contemporary young people. This paper specifically selects parts of contemporary theorising for discussion. A number of studies have begun to comment on other areas of this thesis (see Pilkington 2007 with reference to individualisation). However, the areas of negativity, worry, uncertainty and scepticism are areas which have been relatively under investigated in relation to young people.

This paper draws from the author's doctoral research, which conducted a school based study in the north of England. This study incorporated questionnaires and focus groups for school attending students aged 13 to 18 (focus groups 14-16) during 2003/2004. The school in question (sampled by convenience) educates children from age 11 – 18, with an optional sixth form facility available. The total number of students in Jan 2003 was 1830. Attainment for GCSE awards fall slightly higher than the national average and lower than the national average for GCE/VCE/A/AS point scores (DfES 2003). In relation to relative deprivation, the Ward in which the school resides ranked 2,614 out of 8,414 English Wards. In 2001 37% of those aged 16-74 in this Ward had no qualifications, whereas only 12% were qualified to degree level or higher. In 2000 only 1.2% of the Ward population were of ethnic minority origin. The following information is taken from the Local Authority District (LAD) Crime and Disorder Audit of 2001.

> (…) is situated in the former coalfield area of [county] and has a mixture of urban areas, villages and open country. Historically (…)'s economy was dominated by the area's steel works and coal mines but since the early 1980's twelve of the thirteen coal mines have closed. This has resulted in significant economic, social and environmental decline.

(Audit 2001:7)

After two pilot studies, and collection of consent forms, Phase I of the data collection selected a sample of 212 (151 final total) students for administration of questionnaires. Students were selected using a sampling frame of all the tutor groups in the school. Nine tutor groups were selected using a systematic random sample[iv], with the intention of surveying all students in that group at one given time. The survey included open questions allowing definitions of risk and risk taking to be provided and closed questions assessing levels of perceived risk of various activities. The survey also included five vignettes based upon five features of risky decision making, all on the subject of cannabis use. Preliminary analysis of the survey data created the focus group schedules.

Phase II participants were selected from the original sample of tutor groups, ensuring that all involved had completed Phase I of the research. Due to anonymity it was not possible to select

participants on the basis of their questionnaire responses. The group tutor, who was asked to provide a variety of personalities for the focus groups, therefore elected participants (as did Denscombe 2001b: 163). Eight focus groups were held in total, with five or six participants in each (sampling in total 45 young people). These focus groups allowed a detailed discussion of the same vignettes used in the survey (a detailed exploration of decision making) and an analysis of the types of activity stated as 'risks' from the questionnaires.

Quantitative analysis of the questionnaires involved numerous techniques due to the variety of the question formats. All open questions were coded and quantified. The remaining questions were inputted into SPSS, and recoded for the purpose of 2x2 crosstabulations and correlations. The focus groups were recorded and manually transcribed by the researcher. A thematic analysis via qualitative coding of the data provided evidence which corresponded with the themes presented in a review of previous literature.

Because the school was not randomly selected, and relied on access, availability and the researcher's judgements, the sample is subject to bias and is not representative. Using one school will limit any generalisations made from the analysis to the wider population. This is specifically apparent when looking at the social background of the school and surrounding area. In addition, the influence of truancy on the sample is obvious (Hammersley *et al.* 1997.). With research of this nature it is perturbing that it is those very people who are not present who may engage in the most risk seeking behaviour, skewing the data and therefore the conclusions made. Furthermore, the input of staff into the selection of participants for the focus groups may also contribute to bias. However this study did not aim to produce generalisable findings, rather data which would shed light on the social context of a sample of young people and would add substance to the theoretical risk debate.

It is hoped that the strengths of a mixed methodology outweigh these specific limitations. An investigation into the social context of risk necessitates such a methodology. By using a variety of research techniques mixed methods approaches may 'encourage or allow expression of different facets of knowledge or experience' (Bazeley 2004: 4). Informed and iterative questioning strengthens the validity and reliability of research into lived experiences. Furthermore, a comprehensive picture of risk can be built, as is necessary for this multidimensional concept. The adherence to a postmodern methodology downplays those criticisms of mixed methods research which focus on the conflict of paradigms.

This empirical work began with a clear focus on the legal and health risks of drug taking and drug decisions, rationalised by changes in national drug policy[v]. Much of the overall research findings relate to these areas. However by following a postmodern epistemology, this research did not assume that illegal drugs would be perceived as risky by the sample of young people. This research was committed to understanding the social context of the sample and allowing the participants to create their own definitions of risk. Thus, through the process of data collection, it became obvious that young people's risk perceptions could not be separated into illegal or legal, socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviours. Risky decisions made about illegal drugs could not be analysed as a distinct category. Knowledge and decision making about illegal drugs was incorporated by the young people into the broader category of 'everyday risks', as described by

Luton and Tulloch (2002). In this paper the data presented makes reference to drug decisions as one of *many* risky decisions made by contemporary young people. Thus, a range of behaviours are presented here as evidence of the lived experiences of life in contemporary society..

Similar work linking the theories of late modernity to young people's drug decisions have been documented elsewhere. Pilkington (2007) uses a similar rationale and methodology to apply these contemporary sociological approaches to 'social processes embedded in everyday cultural practice' (*ibid*: 373). The starting point for analysing this empirical data is Beck's concept of individualisation. Whilst this research uses a similar framework, the application stated here is different in scope. In contrast, whilst they touch on the connection with the normalisation thesis (Parker *et al*. 1998) their empirical focus, specifically on drug decisions, fails to fully recognise risk taking in the wider context of 'normal' everyday risky decision making (Lupton 1999). This previous research also says very little on Beck's assumptions of risk as inherently negative. Lee's (2007) study of the risk consciousness of new mothers (incorporating the notion of normal everyday experiences and young children) does structure the analysis of Beck's thesis around concepts of uncertainty and worry, with evidence from interview data to support these notions. Criticisms of the negative focus of recent risk analysis exist (see Parker & Stanworth 2005) and it is hoped that this current paper can also shed further light on this debate.

Findings and Discussion

A selection of findings from a large doctoral research project is presented here to add substance to this debate. They are organised around the main criticisms of this paper and accompanied by a further discussion of the risk literature.

Risk as a negative concept

It is necessary to investigate the assumption that the 'Risk Society' thesis is relevant to the lived experiences of young people. Is the negativity of Beck's work apparent in the risk consciousness of young people to the extent where the rewards of risk taking are diminished and the adverse consequences are more acutely perceived (Adams 1995: 181)? Is Furedi's paranoia of parents (2001) apparent in the minds of their children?[vi] The administered questionnaire asked the sample of young people in this study to provide an example of a risk (or risks) that they had taken. 135 answers were presented in response to this open question. All responses given were categorised into 14 groups according to their similarities. Titles for those categories were selected by the researcher based on a broad classification of the activities contained within them. An analysis of these responses would allow the assumed negativity of risk discourse to be assessed.

Insert Table i here

An analysis of the survey responses did not support the view that risk was socially constructed as a negative concept (see Table i). The most prevalent response to the identification of risk appeared in the categories 'Sports and Leisure' (17.8%). Such risky activities included bungee jumping, playing football and rock climbing. These risks involved individual and team competition which could be perceived as healthy adolescent activities. Furthermore, possible harm (e.g. sporting injuries) could also be praised as signs of a well fought game. As suggested the literature on risk taking in adolescence often falls under the heading of problem behaviour.

Contrarily, the results from this sample show that the majority of examples of risk taking behaviour would not be classified in this manner.

The third most prevalent category was Stunts and Play (12.6% of responses). Such examples included playing in hay bales, performing stunts on a bicycle and jumping from roof tops. The outcomes of such risks were physical rather than deviant, and may be categorised as temporal acts of experimentation, or acts which may be grown out of. The above conclusion dismissing problematic behaviour is thus reinforced. The second most prevalent category, Health (13.3%), was dominated by risks which are status offences and are perceived as acceptable behaviour for adults (alcohol and tobacco use and sex)[vii]. In these three most cited categories the notion of social acceptability was a key factor in the construction of risk definitions.

Such evidence adds to the debate that risk taking for adolescents should not necessarily be perceived as problematic (Lupton & Tulloch 2002). Risky sports such as rock climbing are socially acceptable for adults and young people alike and are not necessarily undertaken through ignorance or coercion (Gardener in Bell & Bell 1993: 66). In addition engagement in such behaviour is aligned to Lyng's (1990) notion of 'edgework'; the use of risk taking to take control of uncertainty creating a situation which can be 'both reassuring and immensely pleasurable' (Young 2007: 57). Can the negativity towards young people's risk taking be explained? Beck's notion of reflexivity can shed some light. Society is now enriched with freedoms and choices that previously did not exist. Consequently, responsibility for decisions and constant evaluation (reflexivity) is necessary. The management of the dichotomy between freedom and responsibility/reflexivity and risk monitoring is overshadowed in late modernity by the concept of security. Given that young people are defined as those in specific need of protection/security, it follows that there may be those who (negating the lived experiences of the young person) increasingly define threats to ontological security in negative terms (rather than a situation of ontological security which can result from this type of 'edgework'). To summarise, this sample showed a preoccupation with risk neutrality rather then risk negativity.

In turn this paper now asks; what is the impact of the negative perspectives of young people's risk taking? What effect is such a label having on our 'problem' youth? (see MORI 2002 research into media portrayal, and Wells 2004). The empirical data used in this paper is able to make specific comment on this issue. Whilst responding to a variety of questions investigating risk (using language of risk, danger, injury, misbehaviour at school/home) this study found that many young people in the sample, although self-reporting risk involvement, were keen to avoid the negative label associated with risk taking. This path of analysis focused on the additional comments written on the questionnaires, by the young people, alongside the example they provided. They were found to justify decision making or to portray a risk averse image. These additional comments were predominantly twofold; they either defended their actions (it wasn't really risky, I was supervised, he deserved it, I didn't do it), or renounced their actions (it was an accident, I am not a risk taker). These remarks were made by similar proportions of males and females and spanned all age groups. Here we see a group of young people who were appealing against the negative label of careless and thoughtless risk takers. They reduced the representation of enjoyment, spontaneity, thrills and excitement to sensibility, rationality and often regret. The detailed results are shown in tabular form below.

Insert Table ii here

This neutralization was used to defend the risk taking act. Predominantly such justification compared an activity to one which was perceived as being of higher risk.

Insert Table iii here

These responses defended the actions on the grounds of safety. Such a justification was used to lower the perceived risk.

Insert Table iv here

The comments made by these respondents defended the risk by claiming the recipient deserved it or negated the action via general acceptance.

Insert Table v here

In this example we see outright renunciation and denial that the act ever occurred. In the table below the respondents show acceptance of the act and remorse for their actions. In both examples the high level of risk is acknowledged by a reaction to the perceived consequences (blame and guilt).

Insert Table vi here

Finally the table below highlights those respondents who were directly appealing against the 'risk taker' label. This was done by either stating that the question was not applicable to them or by stressing that a comparatively minor risk may be all they engaged in.

Insert Table vii here

It is possible to link these findings to Matza's work on 'techniques of neutralisation' (a theory also often rebuffed for lacking empirical foundations) (1964, 1990). Neutralisations can be described as

> rationalisations or supposedly illogical excuses deviants make to account for their violations of values, norms, and laws. Such techniques provide legitimating reasons for misconduct, whilst at the same time saying, we did nothing wrong.
>
> (Davies 1999: 299)

The reference to 'deviant' shows how this theory is outdated when applied to the context of this sample and their associated behaviour. In the grips of late modernity such a label needs revisiting to incorporate a broader definition of activity termed 'risk taking'. If the label 'risk taker' is negatively constructed to align with 'deviant' it follows that the same techniques of neutralisation will apply. Young people are susceptible to risk taking during this stage of their life course and may take control of such decisions to deal with the uncertainty of social life. In turn, and somewhat disproportionately, negative labels are attached to this period of life, or to the activities they engage in. To justify their risk taking behaviour to themselves and to society, it has been found that for this sample, techniques of neutralisation are applied. This conclusion has been

reached in similar studies such as Hammersley *et al.* (2001), who make the link between such mitigating statements and cannabis use. They suggest that the criminalisation of cannabis and subsequent stigmatisation of detection encourages such statements as those found in the tables above.

These results mirror those provided by Jenkin's interviews with 11-15 year olds (2006: 387- 388).

> What was evident throughout these discussions was their desire to demonstrate that they took seriously the immediate risks to their safety and well-being …the desire on the part of the young people to represent themselves as adopting a responsible approach to risk of physical injury was made visible in a number of ways … One of the ways they sought to do this was by demonstrating that their 'risk thermostat' (Adams 1995) is set within acceptable adults limits.

It becomes apparent that some young people attempt to portray a risk averse image. This may be a response to the negative perceptions of many of the activities inherent to risk taking and risky decision making, or the negative fixation of risk governance (Rothstein 2006). However, what is clear is that in these studies young people are attempting to cope with the uncertainties of everyday life yet at the same time have to defend or deny any positive outcomes to the rest of society (as seen in the tables above). This evidence suggests that the perception of youth must change if we are to help young people cope effectively with adolescence and their social world. To this end, the negativity of Beck and colleagues, which symbolises the paranoia of wider society and those concerned with risk management, is unhelpful and misguided.

Risk and worry

The survey sample of young people were asked to respond to a closed Likert scale relating to the level of perceived risk and worry associated with a range of behaviours. These activities were justified by an extensive literature review of participation. The results shown in Figure 1 clearly show that levels of worry are dependent on the type of activity.

Insert Figure 1 here

The most significant result from this graph is the level of worry about the associated risks of drinking alcohol. There appears to be a significant difference in the concern over the risk of other controlled substances, other illegal behaviour and even sporting behaviour and the use of alcohol. Bancroft & Wilson (2007) note a distinction between the conceptualisation of drugs and alcohol in policy, service provision and generated research. It followed that such a distinction is found within adult consumers and young people. The focus group data presented evidence that this perception of alcohol was aligned with notions of control

> X   cos drinking isn't [risky] because you know your limit, in moderation
>
> (mY11)

> W it's all about knowing you limit innit, if you can, some people go stupid and drink as much as they can

V   yeh but you know when you've had enough

<div align="right">(mY11)</div>

The social context of alcohol use and such perceptions of risk have been extensively researched elsewhere. The empirical work and literature reviews of Horness *et al.* (2000) and Newburn & Shiner (2001) provide similar conclusions. Although providing classification by age and extent of use (something which this paper would avoid) these accounts also touch on 'knowing the limits' (*ibid.*). Similarities were also found with the social context of young people's alcohol use and that of adults (Horness *et al.* 2000).

What is clear from viewing Figure 2 is that for this sample worry was positively correlated with perceived risk.

Insert Figure 2 here

Table viii shows that for all variables the higher the perception of risk the higher the level of worry. Both variables were correlated using 4 ordinal response values (very worried/risky, quite worried/risky, not worried/risky, not very worried/risky). Using Spearman Rho all relationships were significant ($p < 0.01$) except for heroin and ecstasy.

Insert Table viii here

These positive correlations highlight the relationship between perceived risk and worry. There does not however appear to be widespread worry. Levels of worry are dependent on levels of perceived risk. Young people, given their propensity to take risks, and the amount of risk at their disposal (comparable to older generations) could be assumed to be more likely to worry than most. It could be argued that the conditions of the 'Risk Society' have more resonance for young people as characterised in the quote below.

> The crucial point is not just that the late modern era is characterised by doubt and uncertainty but that this may be '*existentially troubling*' for ordinary individuals … it is something which young people will be aware of and, more than that, it is something they will perceive as 'troublesome'.
>
> <div align="right">(Denscombe 2001a: 161)</div>

Or perhaps due to the optimistic bias (Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky 1982) of young people during this life stage, risks are down played, and are neither perceived as risky nor worried about. The sample in this study did not fit nicely into either assumption. Whereas a reasonable appraisal of risk was observed for most activities and a positive correlation shown, risk and worry differed considerably in relation to the activity in question. Regardless of Beck's consideration of 'real' risks, young people construct very different appreciations of these activities. Postmodern perspectives, as discussed in the methodology of this paper, (and often cited as 'unhelpful', Flynn 2006), would suggest that this 'reality' is of secondary importance to the social constructs presented here. Assumptions about levels of worry should not then be based on a realist acceptance of objective risk. Judgements and thus interventions should be made based on a detailed understanding of the social and cultural processes at work in the creation of risk consciousness.

Risk and uncertainty

The survey respondents from this study were specifically asked to participate in questions set to measure feelings of uncertainty. For each activity they were asked to respond to a Likert scale of levels of certainty of the possible risks involved. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 here

Over 97% of all respondents suggested 'yes I know the risks involved' of all the activities presented. Very few respondents suggested that they did not know the risks involved or they were unsure of the risks involved. These results contradict the assumption that perceived risk is accompanied by feelings of uncertainty. For this sample of young people, everything is not uncertain. Furedi (2002: 63) notes that 'not knowing the outcomes of our actions strengthens uncertainty and the negative expectations of events'. Therefore we find that young people adopt the conclusion that they **do** know, thus explaining their lack of uncertainty and negative appraisals.

However, what must be considered is whether such confidence is based on skewed risk perceptions or optimistic appraisals of an ability to identify risks. Using the topic of cannabis use as an example of both a governed risk and a perceived risk by young people, further data from the focus groups can add to this discussion. There was evidence to suggest that some of the sample had a skewed perception of 'correct' knowledge. In relation to the use of cannabis the following was observed. Firstly the legality was misunderstood.

> T   it [cannabis] is legal, you can have some, can't you?
>
> (fY10)

Secondly the health implications were also misunderstood.

> Q   dunnit [cannabis] clean your lungs?
> S   yeh cleans your system or summut
>
> (fY10)

The interesting point here is that such an unusual belief was suggested by three different focus groups, in different school years and of different genders. This may reinforce the power of peer group justification, however the source of this information is not known, nor how it actually diffused across age and gender.

Similar misunderstandings were observed in relation to the use of alcohol.

> P   police can't do nothing though can they, you're allowed to drink when you're five
> M   I know, go into a restaurant … and wahey
>
> (mY10)

Conversely, accurate understandings of cannabis use, although not detailed, were also observed.

> B   depends how much you've got as well, if you've got like a lot your gonna get done but if you've just got a

little bit…

if your selling it [cannabis] then its more serious, but if you say its for your own use its not *as* bad, but its
still bad

M   it's [cannabis] as dangerous as any other drug innit, cos it's addictive

These are somewhat moot points to the central debate of uncertainty. Regardless of the extent
(correct or skewed) of their knowledge, these young people were certain that they were aware of
the risk associated with all given activities. It is important to note that there was a distinct lack of
reference to the term 'risk' within these focus groups. As Pilkington (2007) also found and points
out, this finding is revealing in itself. It is apparent that there is an issue with the use of the word
'risk' itself. The word 'risk' was not found to be part of the everyday discourse of young people.
Would this then account for the overwhelmingly positive response to the question 'do you know
the risks involved?' It would seem that the use of 'risk' language is not connected to negativity or
uncertainty for this sample of young people. It could be concluded that the sample may discuss
feelings of uncertainty, however do not associate this discussion with the language of 'risk'.   This
point offers a distinctly different appreciation of risk to that presented by influential commentators
on the 'Risk Society'.

Risk and scepticism of expert voices

The relationship between adolescent scepticism and risk information was analysed via the
quantitative and qualitative vignettes in this study. When faced with a decision surrounding risk
information some 59.6% of respondents said the character in the vignette scenario would believe
the expert (teacher) about the negative aspects of cannabis rather than the experiences of friends
(lay). The follow up focus groups revealed that although knowledge gained from school is taken
as fact, other factors, including the respectability and superiority of the teacher and the bias of the
young people, were also cited as influencing this decision. Very few respondents said they would
be sceptical of the information provided by a teacher. Furthermore, 56.7% of those who said they
believed the teacher could not be persuaded into believing the contradictory experiences of
friends.

M   yeh they're all true anyway
L   there're facts aren't they
so you'd believe him (teacher)?
M   yeh
even though your mates are saying they've never been in trouble?
M   yeh cos they don't know what they're goin on about, they're high as a kite, they're
       just saying cos they're stoned…but what's teachers saying's true so you've got to
       believe him haven't you

> W   no cos not after his friends are like, they're just going on their experiences, science teacher is an educated person, he's gonna know more about it
>
> Z   friends are gonna be pretending they're cool as well, trying to make him do it

In can be suggested that the experiences of peers had a limited effect on the acceptance of knowledge gained from an expert. Only 32.2% of those who choose to accept the information from the teacher also suggested that the information from friends was equally important. These findings again support those of Pilkington that 'young people's drug choices are framed largely within dominant discourses of drug use (they are perceived as 'risky' behaviours with harmful, psychological and social consequences)' (2007: 374). This reinforces the notion that assumed scepticism of expert opinion is not applicable to this sample. The data collection setting must be acknowledged as a possible bias of this result. The focus groups were held during school hours and on school property. However the comments were made in the presence of peers. This moderating factor supports the validity of the comments made.

Conclusions

As Beck, and similarly Giddens, do not adequately detail how risk consciousness will develop in late modern society (Burgess 2006) it is difficult to conclude on the success of failure of this thesis. What contemporary researchers must continue to do is to challenge and assess (via diverse empirical studies) the applicability of these theories to specific individuals and social groups. There are numerous studies which assess the risk perception of young people, however 'it is the reaction to perceived risk, relatively independent of the hazard itself, that is the proper subject matter for social studies of risk' (Burgess 2006: 340). Further Pilkington (2007: 376) argues that the objective risk or hazard which is conceptualised by Beck and Giddens is elevated in importance, rather only the social construction of risk should be truly elevated in importance in contemporary society. This paper has shown that the sample's social construction of risk downplays the concepts discussed by Beck and others, and would conclude:-

. This sample of young people were not negative appraisers of risk
. This sample of young people rejected the negative labels associated with risk taking
. This sample of young people were not inherently worried
. This sample of young people increased their levels of worry in parallel to increases in perceived risk
. This sample of young people did not promote feelings of uncertainty about risk
. This sample of young people did not show feelings of scepticism towards those that provide expert knowledge.

What becomes apparent is either the temporal relativity of the writing or the inability of the thesis to extend to all spheres of late modern life. It has been widely accepted that the conditions which are documented by Beck and Giddens are being felt by contemporary society and can be used to rationalise behaviours and emotions. This paper does not reject the importance of engaging in this theoretical risk debate nor its undoubted influence. However, by using pockets of mixed

methodology, this paper concludes that such extensive acceptance must be reconsidered. Areas of future empirical work would strengthen the social constructionist framework by devoting resources to the specific social and cultural processes involved in an appreciation of risk. This would move away from the recent trend in grand risk theorising to context specific data collection and explanation which can be more appropriately linked to intervention and risk management.

Word Count 8000

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[i] From extremes such as terrorism (Walklate and Mythen 2006a) to early years child care (Lee 2007)
[ii] For example the notion of sensation seeking (Horvath & Zuckerman 1993)
[iii] This process also accounts for risk attenuation (Kasperson et al. 2003)
[iv] Two from Y9, Y10 and Y11 and three mixed Y12/13 groups; each group had approximately equal numbers of males and females.
[v] Specifically the impact of the re-classification of cannabis on young people's risk appraisals
[vi] Jenkins (2006) does not describe the parents in his study as paranoid, rather dealing with 'competing sets of cultural orientations regarding the health and well being of their children' (ibid: 390). This consciousness developed from 'privatized parenting', a key illustration of the individualised nature of risk management described by Beck and Giddens (ibid: 383).
[vii] The exception being the example give of self harm

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Tables

i Types of risk

	Total	% Of Total
Sports and Leisure	24	17.8
Health	18	13.3
Stunts and Play	17	12.6
Disobeying Parents	16	11.9
Transport	16	11.9
Wrong Place, Wrong Time	10	7.4
Roads	9	6.7
Criminal Acts	8	5.9
Association with Others	6	4.4
Helpful Acts	4	3.0
Disobeying the School	4	3.0
Life Choices	1	0.7
Cosmetic	1	0.7
Unknown.	1	0.7
Total	135	100

ii Neutralising the risk

Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Smoked	17	F	Nothing illegal though, just normal cigarettes
Taken drugs	16	F	But not like heroin, just cannabis
Messing about in deep end of the swimming pool	14	F	Other things that weren't dangerous to me
Talking back in class	15	F	Nothing major
Acting silly in class	15	M	Not to the whole class, probably just the person/friend sat next to me
Talking, answered back in class	15	F	Not anything major (really bad)
Just not tidying up at home	14	M	Nothing really bad

iii Stressing safety precautions

Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Lighting fireworks	15	M	Supervised by parents
Ride on a motorbike with my Dad	16	F	But always wear the correct safety equipment
Fireworks	15	M	Supervised

iv Justifying the risk

Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Sitting in the middle of the road and waiting for a car to come	13	M	This man used a lot of verbal abuse against me but I deserved it
Set alarm off at school, shout at teachers	16	F	Only when they are unfair
Swearing, being late, forgetting things, calling people names at school	15	M	But as a joke
Being disobedient, lying to parents, misbehaving	14	F	General teenage upsets

v Denial

Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Stole some dust caps	14	M	But I didn't steal them and I got blamed

vi Highlighting guilt

Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Getting drunk, being in places where I'm not meant to be, lying to my parents	14	F	Which I regret
Left my friend out of activity	14	F	I felt guilty
Kicked a ball at my friends head	14	M	By accident
Almost killed my brother	14	M	Did not mean to

vii Disassociate from risk taking

Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Walking down to the shops at night without parents knowing	15	M	Not really a dangerous person
None stated	15	M	I have not really done anything
None stated	15	F	I've never been in any serious trouble at school

viii Perceived Worry/Risk

Activity	Correlation	Significance	N
Smoking cannabis	.652	.000	144
Drinking alcohol	.462	.000	146
Smoking tobacco	.595	.000	144
Riding a motorcycle	.422	.000	140
Truanting from school	.506	.000	143
Not wearing a seatbelt	.511	.000	146
Rock climbing	.332	.000	133
Using heroin	.096	.254	142
Taking ecstasy	.161	.054	144
Stealing from a shop	.478	.000	142
Spraying graffiti/vandalising	.451	.000	141

Figures

Figure 1 Percentage of respondents who were worried about the risks of the following activities

Figure 2 Percentage of respondents who thought the given activities were risky

Figure 3 Percentage of respondents who said they knew the risks of the following activities