

## Confronting the Millennium: Beck, Risk and Y2K

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*The concepts of risk, risk awareness and risk society have become some of the most widely debated in social theory in recent years, making the name of their leading proponent, Ulrich Beck, well known outside his native Germany. However Beck's theoretical efforts and empirical claims remain largely untested. In this paper, we examine the social reception of the Y2K phenomenon, taking it as a laboratory for exploring Beck's ideas on the salience of risk consciousness in contemporary society. Media discourses concerning the arrival of the new millennium provide prima facie support for a Beckian perspective. These focused on the so-called Y2K bug and the consequent invisible dangers, and incalculable uncertainties, of an impending calendar change within a technologically dependent society. However, discourses on the millennium as a celebration or religious event existed in competition with this. The article reports on a regional (SE Queensland) survey testing the relevance of Beck's concept of risk consciousness within this pluralistic cultural field. The results provide only mixed support for Beck's position, with the risk frame being endorsed by a minority of respondents. As Beck predicts, information-seeking on Y2K fuelled a risk consciousness. However correlations with age, education and class anticipated in his writings were not supported by the data. Further empirical studies are required to evaluate Beck's provocative but rather sweeping theory.*

**Key Words:** Beck; risk; risk society; millennium; Y2K

### Introduction

The historical record attests to the power of millennial moments in Western culture. In the two thousand years since the birth of Christ, pivotal calendar events have stimulated widespread concern among both citizens and elites. As documented by historians such as Norman Cohn,<sup>2</sup> such episodes were marked by both fear and hope. Fears revolved around apocalyptic visions of the end of the earth accompanying the second coming of Christ. Famines, natural disasters and divine retribution were identified as possible threats to both individuals and the wider social order. Hopes centered on utopian visions of community and earthly paradise. It was believed that a new, purified world could emerge from the ashes of the old—at least for those elected to salvation. As a way of confronting such risks and possibilities millennial movements would often emerge at such times. Empowered by a febrile collective effervescence, they were characterised by liminality and *communitas*, with sacred concepts of time and place coming to replace those of a more secular nature.<sup>3</sup>

The arrival of the year 2000 was heralded by discourses of a different sort from those of the Middle Ages. Notwithstanding the efforts of church groups, there was little space for explicitly theological concerns. This should come as no surprise: after all, some 500 years of disenchantment have transformed the characteristics of Western culture. Despite this secularising trend themes of

risk and uncertainty remained in place much as before. These revolved around understandings of technological rather than eschatological risks arriving with the millennium. The prevalence of these concerns can be understood as consistent with Beck's concept of 'risk society'<sup>4</sup> and with the idea that we have entered an era wherein modernity itself is the source of threats to human well-being. Beck contends that nature and God are no longer the cause of our anxieties, but rather that the roots of these anxieties lie in the industrial and technological systems that have been developed during the past two centuries. These have generated risks which are unknowable and incalculable, but potentially apocalyptic in their implications. A new public culture of reflexivity and fear sees widespread unease and a distrust of institutions and experts. Although Beck's concept of 'risk society' is largely centred around the environmental hazards which accompany technological development, his central theme—that modern risks are, so to speak, 'invisible'—is clearly applicable to the dangers posed by the arrival of Y2K. Contrasting the earlier epochs of industrialism with contemporary society, Beck argues that:

... hazards in those days assaulted the nose or the eyes and were thus perceptible to the senses, while the risks of civilization today typically escape perception and are localised in the sphere of physical and chemical formulas (e.g. toxins in foodstuffs or the nuclear threat).<sup>5</sup>

As Adams<sup>6</sup> has usefully pointed out, Beck may well exaggerate the distinction between the visible hazards and dangers of yesteryear and modern, imperceptible risks. Although human excrement was plainly visible in 18th century towns and cities, the risks to health which such hazards posed—typhoid, dysentery, cholera—were not. However millennial concerns over the so-called Y2K bug are arguably a more appropriate illustration of the existence of Beck's concept of invisible dangers. Put simply, this was the belief that systems dependent on computerised technology would crash as their virtual internal clocks ticked over from a year code of 99 to one of 00—something that they were allegedly incapable of reading. As society had become 'over-reliant on the infallibility of computer technologies in the late 20th-century'<sup>7</sup> the potential implications of this could be very serious. Impacts that were touted ranged from planes falling out of the sky to widespread power failures and on to food shortages, a stock market crash and global recession, civil unrest and even nuclear winter. However, nobody could be certain how severe the implications of the arrival of 2000 could be. Some authorities predicted disaster, others that nothing would happen. Despite an estimated \$920 billion spent worldwide to rectify the problem<sup>8</sup> uncertainty prevailed. Experts could not agree, and citizens had to make up their own minds. In sum, Y2K provides an excellent laboratory for exploring the viability of Beck's risk society hypothesis—the dangers of the new millennium were invisible, technological and incalculable.

### **Media discourses on the millennium**

This abstract conceptual fit is confirmed by an analysis of concrete media reporting in the months leading up to the millennium. This exhibits a highly developed risk consciousness of the kind discussed by Beck, with considerable attention given to the possibility of a secular apocalypse. In Australia, the context for the research reported here, some \$12–15 billion was spent on preparations and a special taskforce was set up in Canberra, the nation's capital. Similar preparations took place elsewhere around the globe. Still, as 1st January loomed, the media were making grim predictions. Consistent with Beck's vision of unease, on New Year's Eve *The Australian* ran a story called 'Y2K Alert: There Will Be Trouble', confidently stating that 'Australia is certain to experience Y2K failures this weekend'.<sup>9</sup> The previous month had witnessed an intensification of stories covering the theme of potential disaster, as well as a parallel set on preparations for disaster. *The Australian* of 11th December 1999 contained a feature entitled 'Y2B Afraid', which was capped by a striking montage of the Sydney skyline. The city was

depicted aglow as fires raged unchecked, planes were crashing and boats sinking into the Harbour, with the event witnessed by a panic-stricken citizen looking something like the protagonist of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. The text, however, spoke of a secret Y2K bunker crammed with experts and troubleshooters, where various scenarios were being evaluated.<sup>10</sup> Government preparations of a different kind were also noted in Canada, where Project Solstice had been set up to counter terrorism and the possibilities of civil unrest.<sup>11</sup> Other feature articles looked at the preparedness of individuals rather than the state. Typical of this frame was 'Diehard Survivalists Ready for the Unknown'. It spoke of Perth resident John Croft, who had:

... grown a vegetable patch, drilled a bore, bought candles and solar panels and stocked the pantry with enough organic food to keep 18 neighbouring households fed for weeks.<sup>12</sup>

*The Australian* reported that 'Camping Stores Cash in on Y2K Fears' and spoke of a 'survival fever' that had led to a spending spree on special Y2K packs.<sup>13</sup> Similar anxieties can be found in the United States media. Thus *Time* magazine reported on Bruce and Diane Eckhart, who had purchased a gas-powered home generator, a year's supply of dehydrated food and a waterbed to store an extra 300 gallons.<sup>14</sup> Top of the league, however, was one Bruce Beach, who had spent 20 years burying 42 buses underground and cementing them together. The resulting 900-square-metre complex was said to be able to survive nuclear war.<sup>15</sup>

The 2000 millennium, then, with its highly developed risk discourse, offers a prime research site for an investigation into the characteristics, strength and social location of a risk consciousness. Methodologically, however, it is important to recognise the existence of contending frames. Beck's writing exhibits a developed monoglossia. His repeated emphasis on risk discourses downplays the fact that contending cultural frames often exist surrounding risk events and agents. Many are orthogonal to risk discourses or can trump them. Consider the case of nuclear power. For Beck<sup>16</sup> this can only be understood in terms of risk, where the key concepts are fallibility, scepticism and 'shadows of immeasurable consequences'. But the history of nuclear debate is marked by far more diversity than Beck allows. In his empirical investigation William Gamson<sup>17</sup> points out that a discourse on national security and on autonomy from Middle Eastern oil supplies provided a potent frame in debates about United States nuclear power policy; another offered a critique of nuclear energy on the basis of value for money. In such cultural schemas, themes of technological risk evaluation and risk consciousness play no obvious part. They are simply irrelevant. To investigate Beck's applicability to Y2K without prejudging the matter we need to be open to such possibilities.

Risk theorists and scholars such as Douglas and Wildavsky,<sup>18</sup> Adams<sup>19</sup> and Thompson<sup>20</sup> have, of course, argued for the importance of universal or abstract worldviews in shaping risk frames and discourses. Whilst not discounting the wider cultural influences which mediate the construction and perception of risk, our position is closer to that of Gamson in arguing for a more grounded approach which treats risks frames as indexical or locally specific to the research site in question. That is, we place greater analytic significance on those cultural discourses and frames which were demonstrably in currency in the months leading to the arrival of the new millennium.

Turning to the media again, we find that although Beckian frames concerned with risk, disaster and disaster preparation were dominant, they were far from exclusive to understanding the millennium. A separate discourse of celebration understood the millennium to be 'Party 2000',<sup>21</sup> where thousands of people could enjoy a memorable night out with food, drink, sociality and fireworks. Stories covered diverse preparations for having fun. These ranged from licensing law changes around the globe, to special cruises and vacation options, to accounts of civic festivities in diverse cities, to descriptions of various domes, clocks and other engineering feats.<sup>22</sup> Countering this bonhomie, and in a sense generated by it as a logical possibility, was another discourse of

indifference. Thus we are told that 'Chathamites reckon dawn 2000 not all it's cracked up to be'. Residents of the remote islands to the east of New Zealand—the first inhabited land on which the rays of the third millennium would fall—would it seems be greeting the dawn in bed.<sup>23</sup> Similarly *The Economist* spoke of 'Millennium Party-Poopers',<sup>24</sup> pointing to a survey by UK supermarket Tesco which showed that nearly half the population expected to stay at home on New Year's Eve. These themes were echoed by Tim Dowling, writing in *The Spectator* of 11th December, who suggested that '1999 has become the most over-hyped, underwhelming year since the much anticipated 1984'.<sup>25</sup> This discourse of apathy could also cut against the discourse of doom. Thus the same article in *The Economist* went on to argue that 91 per cent of respondents were unconcerned about the bug and that 'bug bores are officially in retreat' as 'discussion of the bug in a social context appears to be at a low point'.<sup>26</sup> In Canada, meanwhile, it was reported that there was a 'sense of exhaustion' and that people 'just want it over with'.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, there were religious discourses, perhaps now occupying the position of the 'residual' identified by Raymond Williams.<sup>28</sup> These saw the coming millennium as a moment of great religious significance. Here most media reports centred on cults or religious extremists and linked them to the doomsday scenarios discussed above. Many articles referred to the arrival of religious fundamentalists in Jerusalem, and noted the measures being taken by the Israeli state.<sup>29</sup> However, this discourse also had a more local presence. *The Australian*, for example, carried a headline 'Cultists Pose No Threat, Say Police'.<sup>30</sup> Rather less common were reports such as that in *Maclean's* concerning the reactions of the mainstream churches. The article referred to the plan by the rector of Canada's most easterly parish to initiate a nationwide roll of bell-ringing 'to celebrate the start of the third Christian millennium'.<sup>31</sup> Also in this vein was the story 'Jesus 2000' concerning representations of Christ made by over 1000 artists from 19 countries.<sup>32</sup>

To conclude, the millennium was framed by four key discourses: risk, celebration, indifference and religious event. Thus risk-related themes existed alongside others which provided equally plausible interpretations of the millennium and equally attractive templates for social action. Our aim in the remainder of the paper is not to unpack these frames or to critique what in retrospect appears to have been sensationalist and irresponsible coverage,<sup>33</sup> but rather to focus on responses to the millennium among ordinary citizens. Questions need to be asked about the distribution of these within the broader population. To what extent did ordinary people endorse each cultural pattern? How widely dispersed was a risk consciousness of the kind discussed by Beck? Who was most attuned to the dangers of Y2K in our 'risk society'?

### **Data collection and methods**

To investigate these issues, a sample of 500 randomly selected non-institutionalised adults was drawn from the South East Queensland division of the Australian Electoral Roll in the final week of November 1999, and a short self-completion survey form was mailed to each respondent. It is a legal requirement in Australia to be included on the electoral roll, which in practice covers over 90 per cent of the population. The state capital, Brisbane, is located in this region and the area also includes heavily populated coastal strips and some smaller provincial towns as well as rural and agricultural hinterland. In short the region covers the majority of the residential types and locales found in contemporary Australia. The survey form was accompanied by a cover letter identifying the respondent by name, and a stamped addressed envelope for the return of the questionnaire. A reminder letter was mailed in the second week of December to those respondents who had not returned the survey form. By the time field work concluded on December 30, a total of 18 forms had been returned undelivered, whilst 218 completed replies were received. The effective response rate was thus 45 per cent. Women were marginally more represented in the returns than the population at large, but in other respects there appear to be no other biases in the sample compared with the official demographic picture.

Questions on the survey were concerned with the following themes:

- knowledge of Y2K and sources of information consulted;
- fears and concerns about the possible dangers of Y2K;
- preparations and precautions for the arrival of Y2K;
- plans for celebrating the new millennium;
- basic demographic and SES information.

As will be seen, by collecting such basic information inferences could begin to be made about the social distribution of the various symbolic frames we have identified above. We begin our analysis of the data with some simple statistics. First, an overwhelming majority of respondents had some basic knowledge of the Y2K risk event. Some 98 per cent had first heard of it six months or more before completing the survey form, and 82 per cent correctly identified it as 'a bug or virus that may affect computer systems'. If knowledge was widespread, however, interest in Y2K was more limited. Only 51 per cent of respondents said that if they came across a newspaper article on Y2K they were 'likely' or 'very likely' to read it. By contrast, some 34 per cent were 'unlikely' or 'very unlikely' to read the article.

Another item asked for similar information about the risk frame, but in a different way. Here respondents were provided with a list of media forums, and asked if they had '...endeavoured to find out information about Y2K from any of the following sources'. Greater emphasis is placed here on active information-seeking. In every case only a minority of respondents seemed to have made the effort to locate information. Depending on the forum, between 51 per cent (television) and 86 per cent (Internet) of respondents had made no effort to use it to find out more about Y2K. These results point to a division among the respondents between those endorsing the risk and indifference frames. Roughly put, half the respondents were sufficiently concerned to seek information, whilst around half had little or no interest. Certainly they do not sustain an impression of widespread fear.

Turning to preparations for a potential millennium disaster, we find a similar story. Respondents were asked how likely it was that they would undertake various risk management strategies in the lead-up to the new millennium. Around half the population were 'likely' or 'very likely' to get records of their bank accounts (50 per cent) and get out extra money in addition to normal requirements (47 per cent). Interest in other preparations was even lower. In declining order: obtaining candles (40 per cent); getting extra food (34 per cent); getting bottled water (27 per cent); turning off appliances prior to midnight (26 per cent); getting a first aid kit (17 per cent); getting extra fuel (11 per cent); filling the bath with water (11 per cent).

Although relatively few of our sample indicated they would be taking these practical precautionary measures, there was, however, more concern expressed about the hypothetical dangers of travel during the arrival of the new millennium. Fifty per cent indicated they would be 'very concerned' if they were on board a plane at midnight on 31st December 1999, and a further 16.5 per cent expressed a lesser level of 'some concern'. In contrast, only 15 per cent indicated they would have 'no concern at all'. Twenty-one per cent expressed a similar degree of concern about train travel but fewer than ten per cent had serious reservations about boat or car travel. Overall, these findings suggest the following: approximately 50 per cent of the population had no substantial concerns; among those worried about the impact of Y2K there was a degree of concern, but only a minority of 10 per cent were sufficiently worried to take more extreme steps, such as stockpiling fuel and water. In other words the risk discourse had a resonance with at most half the population.

However, it is noteworthy that between 30 and 50 per cent of the sample were sufficiently concerned to undertake some simple precautionary measures, and a clear majority of the population had fears about aeroplane travel.

In order to explore the discourse of celebration, respondents were asked about their plans for New Year's Eve. Some 84 per cent of the respondents intended to celebrate, around 67 per cent of these with friends. However only a minority (some 19 per cent) had finalised their plans 'a few months' or 'a year or more' previously. This finding suggests that low-key celebration was to be the norm, with only a minority treating the millennium as an extra-special party. In a similar vein, only 21 per cent intended to celebrate the sunrise on New Year's Day. This is a significant indicator, as celebrating the sunrise requires a particular effort. One must either stay awake all night, or else get out of bed very early (in Australia the New Year takes place in summer).

We turn finally to the question of the religious frame. As might be expected, any apocalyptic fears now took a largely secular form. Respondents were asked what they most feared about the arrival of the new millennium. Only one per cent most feared the 'divine retribution and the judgement of mankind', whilst 28 per cent most feared 'defence weapon failure and nuclear accidents', 39 per cent 'public utility breakdown', nine per cent 'citizen panic and civil unrest', and six per cent 'food crisis and rationing of basic supplies'. Slightly more people were prepared to make religious preparations for the millennium, with 26 per cent 'likely' or 'very likely' to 'undertake special prayer' and nine per cent to 'pay more attention' to their horoscope.

To conclude this section, empirical results showed mixed but still substantial support for the various models of the millennium, with no single model dominant but with the religious frame lagging behind. Of course, respondents could quite possibly endorse more than one frame. For example, the belief that there might be a food shortage would not preclude having a party. Moreover, strength of commitment to each frame could vary, depending upon the stringency of the test that is applied. Hence the results we have reported so far can only capture the range of support for each position. Using the more inclusive measures, we suggest an upper ceiling of around 84 per cent for celebration, 50 per cent for indifference and risk, and 26 per cent for religion. Such definitions would capture even those who endorsed a particular frame in a minimal way—for example by intending a simple prayer, an extra visit to a cash machine, showing up at a party, or not having bothered to hunt for information.

A vignette test provided a way to simplify the picture, and to force respondents to abandon weak beliefs and prioritise the millennium model that came closest to their own position. Respondents were provided with brief summaries, each capturing a potential response to the event but in a heightened form.<sup>34</sup> They were then asked to select the one that came closest to their own personal views. Results here were broadly consistent with those found earlier. Some 39 per cent selected the celebration vignette, followed by 34 per cent deciding that the millennium and Y2K were just 'a lot of fuss'. Only 17 per cent most strongly endorsed the risk perspective, and a mere five per cent the religious model.

## **Discussion**

In themselves these results are interesting in that they caution against viewing the Y2K episode solely as a time of danger, doubt and uncertainty. Despite the overwhelming preponderance of the technological risk framework within media coverage of the impending millennium, and the conceptual match of Y2K to the Beckian risk archetype, it is clear that only a minority of the population embraced an apocalyptic, risk-driven frame. This lends support to our contention that risk frames exist in a competitive cultural environment. They must struggle not only to be heard

but also to be heeded. This raises further, more sociological, questions concerning the distribution of diverse belief patterns in the wider population. In order to pursue this we undertook a series of regression analyses, using as dependent variables scales constructed from the items discussed above. Four scales corresponding to each millennium discourse were generated: 'risk', which comprised the variables covering the undertaking of precautionary measures (stockpiling food, candles, bottled water, etc), perceived concern about plane travel at the moment of the arrival of the new millennium (midnight on 31st December 1999), and the selection of the apocalyptic vignette description; 'celebration', comprising variables tapping the extent and nature of plans for celebrating the new millennium at midnight and the first sunrise, together with the celebration vignette description; 'religious event', which comprised variables concerning the undertaking of special prayer, the consultation of one's horoscope and the religious event vignette selection; and finally 'indifference', a residual category measured by those selecting the vignette description that the arrival of the new millennium was really 'a lot of fuss'.

In addition to the standard demographic items, a number of constructed independent variables were also created. The first, 'information seeking', was measured by the number of possible sources of information that the respondent had consulted in an endeavour to learn more about Y2K, and ranged from zero to a maximum of five. The second constructed variable, 'technological uptake', was designed to ascertain the extent of familiarity with computer technology on the part of the respondent, and comprised input variables concerning ownership of a personal computer, Internet connection at home and the extent of Internet usage.<sup>35</sup>

The results of the regression analysis are given in Table 1.

**Table 1. Factors effecting perception of the character of the new millennium: regression co-efficients for a range of explanatory variables**

Independent variables	Model 1 'risk'	Model 2 'celebration'	Model 3 'religious event'	Model 4 'indifference'
<b>Gender</b>				
Males	-1.436	0.334	-0.419	0.032
<b>Age</b>				
18-30	-5.783**	2.535**	-0.473	-0.353
31-40	-3.547	0.441	-0.747	-0.141
41-50	-4.289	-0.684	-0.400	-0.236
<b>Education</b>				
Secondary/vocational	-0.777	-0.149	0.581	-0.899*
Some tertiary	0.457	-0.079	0.639	-0.962*
Tertiary	-1.293	-0.092	0.629	-0.720
<b>Class location</b>				
Managerial/professional	0.226	-0.098	-0.206	-0.424
Para-professional/trade	2.615	-0.749	-0.353	-0.136
Clerical	5.109*	-0.401	0.009	-0.610
<b>Information seeking</b>	1.805***	0.255	0.074	-0.096
<b>Technological uptake</b>	-0.397	0.279	-0.249***	0.070
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.143	.124	.118	.070
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	.086	.066	.059	.008
<b>N</b>	192	192	193	193

\* p < 0.05    \*\* p < 0.01    \*\*\* p < 0.001

Looking first at model 1, 'risk', we can observe that younger respondents (those aged between 18 and 30) were significantly less likely than older people (those over 50, the excluded age category in the regression analysis) to perceive the arrival of the new millennium as a time of danger and uncertainty. From Beck's perspective this finding is rather surprising. He argues that younger people ('freedom's children') are the vanguard of risk society, with an acute awareness of the dangers thrown up by technologically advanced capitalist society; he also predicts a positive association between education and risk consciousness.<sup>36</sup> We found no significant effects due to education, but class location did matter. In our analysis we distinguished between four class groupings, derived from the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO). The ASCO system is essentially a skill-based classification, which recognises nine occupational groupings. Our model contained four aggregated class groups: managers and professionals; para-professionals, technical and tradespersons; clerical and intermediate workers; and elementary or manual labourers. The results indicate that the class of clerical workers were significantly more likely than manual workers (the excluded category) to select the risk model. Finally, those who had sought out information about the Y2K phenomenon from multiple sources were significantly more likely than those who had made little effort to familiarise themselves with the dangers and risks to perceive the new millennium in apocalyptic terms.

The results for the remaining models can be dealt with more briefly. Perhaps not surprisingly, younger respondents were significantly more likely to view the arrival of new millennium as a 'celebratory' occasion. 'Freedom's children', it seems, were more interested in partying than in preparing for a secular apocalypse. Rather less intuitively obvious is the finding that respondents who owned personal computers and were also heavy Internet users were significantly less likely than other respondents to see the arrival of the new millennium as a time of religious significance (a 'religious event'). Perhaps what we are witnessing here is a counterposing of a 'scientific/technical' worldview with a spiritual/religious orientation. Finally, there was a small but statistically significant effect due to education concerning the fourth of our models—'indifference'. Respondents with secondary and vocational education, and those with some tertiary training, were less likely than those with only primary education (the excluded category) to view the arrival of the new millennium as an overrated event which they would be doing their best to ignore.

### Conclusion

Writing on the millennial movements of the Middle Ages, Cohn indicates that their support base had distinctive social correlates. He points to the ways that:

Journeyman and unskilled workers, peasants without land or with too little land to support them, beggars and vagabonds, the unemployed and those threatened with unemployment [were most susceptible to] any disturbing, frightening or exciting event.

These people were most likely to be infected by the spirit of a millennial movement and to '... form a salvationist group under a messianic leader'.<sup>37</sup> The results of this study suggest something rather different is taking place today. There was no clear correlation between social disadvantage and belief in a risk-driven apocalyptic scenario. Indeed, as we saw in Table 1, clerical workers and information seekers were most likely to fear Y2K and to undertake material preparations. These findings are interesting because they both offer partial support for Beck's observations about risk society and point to the need for a refinement of his position. Beck argues that the logic of the distribution of risks in the period of the new modernity is radically different to the older distribution of class-based life chances. According to Beck the 'material immiseration' associated



with the early period of industrialisation is the opposite of the 'immiseration through hazards'. As he explains:

In the past the affliction was dictated along with one's class fate. One was born into it. It stuck to one. It lasted from youth to old age ... Risk positions on the contrary contain a quite different type of victimization. There is nothing taken for granted about them ... One hears of them or reads of them. This transmission through knowledge means that the groups that tend to be afflicted are *better educated* and *actively inform themselves* ... Risk consciousness and activism are more likely to occur where the direct pressure to make a living has been relaxed or broken, that is among the wealthier and more protected groups.<sup>38</sup>

Beck is arguing (in contrast to Cohn) that those most likely to fear the dangers and hazards of the risk society are the more prosperous, affluent and better educated. But our research has shown that heightened perception of the risks associated with the impending new millennium was not located within these more elite strata. Being better educated and more affluent was *per se* no more likely to be a determinant of 'risk consciousness' than the absence of these factors. What was important, however, was having actively sought out specific information about the 'risk phenomenon' in question. The old adage that 'ignorance is bliss' appears to be relevant here. Support for this view can also be gleaned from the finding that those engaged in clerical activities were also more likely than other class groups to develop risk awareness. The majority of these respondents would have been employed in office and white collar activity involving the use of computers, and as a consequence they were likely to have been exposed to company and organisation plans and policies to ensure that their workplaces were 'Y2K compliant', and may even have been instrumental in implementing these themselves. That they still were uncertain about the millennial changeover would come as no surprise to Beck, given his remarks about the public's unease and distrust of experts and scientists. Indeed, our finding supports Beck's general stance *contra* Aaron Wildavsky,<sup>39</sup> who argues that knowledge of risks tends to diminish fear. Beck's position, of course, is that information-seeking cannot resolve anxieties, but rather encourages further apprehension.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly it is not possible to refute the numerous theoretical claims concerning risk and risk perceptions advanced by Beck on the basis of one small regional study. However, we must conclude by underlining our major finding of only qualified support for Beck. As Alexander and Smith<sup>41</sup> point out, Beck's style is one that tends towards hyperbole. His vision is one of a world in crisis, where levels of social concern are high and where consequent epochal social transformations are just around the corner. Our research, by contrast, showed only weak and inconsistent support for the reception of apocalyptic discourses on Y2K among the wider community. Despite media saturation on the dangers of Y2K, most people had no time for doomsayers. Levels of concern were quite low overall, with celebration and indifference notably popular alternative responses to a threatening situation of potentially unprecedented magnitude. Why this should be the case is a task beyond the present paper. It is possible, as Karl Dake<sup>42</sup> has suggested, that assessment of risk perception may be influenced by an individual's 'orienting dispositions', involving psychological and personality elements rather than simply the demographic factors we have concentrated upon in this paper. Likewise, the concept of the 'risk thermostat' developed by Adams<sup>43</sup> may have applicability to the responses to the millennium we have identified. Patterns of behaviour can be thought of as indicators of a cognitive process of risk compensation. Future research into risk consciousness may thus require methodological strategies which blend social, cultural and psychological variables. What is clear, and here we are in agreement with Robert Dingwall,<sup>44</sup> is that Beck's provocative but immodest empirical claims are in need of empirical testing and refinement through the routine work of social scientists. Whilst the Y2K risk episode will not be repeated, other technologically driven threats will provide ample opportunity for further social scientific research informed by his theory.

**Notes**

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