

Beyond the 'affect heuristic': the emotion-risk assemblage

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Abstract

Little sociological research, with the notable exception of that on edgework, has focused directly on the emotional dimensions of risk rationalities. This space has largely been occupied by cognitive psychological approaches, particularly the 'affect heuristic' model. In this model, emotion is singled out as separate from and often in opposition to cognition. Emotional responses to risk are positioned as irrational and potentially misleading because they are viewed as emerging from the body and not from the mind. In this paper I argue that the theorising of the emotional dimensions of risk must recognise their fluid, dynamic and often contradictory and ambivalent nature. I take a relativist approach to both risk and emotion, and contend that emotion configures risk and risk configures emotion, and that aspects such as embodiment and location in space and place are important in these configurations. I propose the concept of the 'emotion-risk assemblage' as a way of acknowledging the contingent, constantly changing and inextricable aspects of the emotion and risk relationship. This concept avoids the attempt to position emotion as either rational or irrational, contending instead that it may better be viewed as one form of thinking.

Introduction

My starting point for this paper is that people's responses to and assessment of risk are inevitably imbued with emotion, whether this is experienced at the pre-conscious, unconscious or conscious levels. To construct an event, individual or object as a 'risk' to oneself and to label it as such is to engage in a process in which these phenomena are deemed threatening, frightening or dangerous. Such emotions as fear, apprehension, terror, anger, anxiety, guilt, sadness and disgust, as well as the more positive emotions of excitement and elation, are associated with 'risk'. The term 'risk' is itself is therefore culturally coded with emotional meaning, which gives it its resonance and power. Indeed it is asserted by some social theorists that the concept of 'risk' has gained particular resonance and dominance in late modernity because of a widespread generalised and low-level anxiety and fear, a sense that we are living in uncertain and disorienting times, that imminent disaster awaits (Beck 1992, Massumi 1993, Lash *et al.* 1994, Beck 2009, 2011). These feelings have been exacerbated by the environmental disasters, global financial crises and terrorist attacks of the early years of this century that have challenged the efficacy of neoliberal forms of governance in dealing with such events (Giddens 2009, Dean 2010, Beck 2011).

It is surprising, therefore, that the academic literature, with the notable exception of psychological research, has rarely sought to engage directly with emotional dimensions of risk. There are vibrant literatures in both the sociology of emotion and the sociology of risk, for example, but thus far little engagement between the two. A computer search of the literature using the keyword 'risk' combined with 'affect' or 'emotion' will generate a long list of journal articles published in psychology journals and in articles

appearing in risk analysis and risk management journals written by psychologists, but very few in sociology, anthropology or cultural studies.

In the sociological literature is evident that in some ways the pleasurable dimensions of voluntary risk-taking, the thrills and excitement it may offer as well as the satisfactions achieved by mastering fear, have been explored in greater detail than have the negative emotions involved in risk rationalities. A now extensive literature on the sociology of voluntary risk-taking as part of dangerous activities, or what is alternatively termed 'edgework' (Lyng 1990), has uncovered the heightened embodied sensations and emotions that such activities produce. This research has demonstrated the complexities of the production and management of emotion in edgework. Edgework involves a balance between wanting to experience the intense thrill engendered as part of engaging in dangerous activities but also acknowledging the presence of fear and seeking to exert mastery over this fear, which in turn heightens feelings of being in control. The combination of intense emotional arousal and focused attention leads edgeworkers to experience alterations in perception of time and space and feelings of hyper-reality which generate their sense of the experience as deeply authentic (see, for example, Lyng 1990, Lois 2001, Lyng 2005, 2012).

Apart from this literature, the vast bulk of research on risk judgements and assessments has tended to focus on the intricacies of how people develop and express their understandings of risk while failing to engage with the emotions, often extremely intense, produced as part of these rationalities. As Wilkinson (2006) has argued, expert writing on risk tends to adopt a dispassionate tone, failing to convey the full affective meaning of the pain, fear, loss and suffering that underpin individuals' responses to risk. He asserts that researchers need to examine the cultural meanings related to the threat of suffering and previous experiences of suffering that influence people's risk rationalities: poverty, unemployment, ill-health and disease, disability, pain, crime, violence, sexual abuse and so on. Hallowell (2006) similarly contends that the 'abstraction of risk' from the reality of living with a threat often avoids recognition of the suffering that is generated from being nominated as 'at risk'.

The 'affect heuristic'

Much of the psychological literature on the topic of risk and emotion relates to what has been termed the 'affect heuristic', developed in particular by Paul Slovic and colleagues (Slovic *et al.* 2002, Slovic *et al.* 2004, 2007). The affect heuristic is a model of human behaviour that has been lauded as one of the most important accomplishments in risk analysis research in the past thirty years (Greenberg *et al.* 2012). Proponents of this model essentially propose that emotion is important in guiding judgements or decisions, acting as a kind of 'mental shortcut' by which these judgements or decisions can be made quickly. In relation specifically to risk, emotion is positioned as contributing to a linear process of individuals' thought processes as part of their responses to and identification of risks. What is variously described as 'affect', 'feeling',

'intuition' or 'emotion' is typically viewed as preceding and separate from reason (Slovic *et al.* 2007, Slovic and Västfjäll 2010).

This approach therefore continues the distinction between embodied emotional sensations and cognitive reasoning processes that is typical of other psychological approaches. Emotion is described as belonging to the 'experiential system', which is characterised as intuitive, fast and as often operating at an unconscious level. It is contended that what is called the 'analytic system', in contrast, uses rational, logical and mathematical reasoning and normative rules. It is argued that each system operates parallel to each other and informs each other. This formulation has led to a distinction between 'risk as feelings', 'risk as analysis' and 'risk as politics'. 'Risk as feelings' involves the experiential system, 'risk as analysis' draws upon the analytic system, while 'risk as politics' involves a 'clash' between the two systems of response (Slovic *et al.* 2004) (typically portrayed in the risk analysis literature as differences between the 'overly emotional' lay public and the 'analytic' expert risk assessors).

This concept of emotion as an inherent instinctive response that distorts rational judgement stems from a long history in human thought that positions the emotions as 'primitive' rather than 'reasoned' responses because of their physiological components (Lupton 1998, Kirman *et al.* 2010). The approach also assumes that expert judgement is free of emotional involvement, produced through the rational workings of the mind and therefore typical of 'modern scientific thought' unencumbered by bodily responses such as emotion. Lay people are emotional, and by implication, influenced by their bodies: experts are rational, their bodily sensations absent from their judgements of and responses to risk.

The affect heuristic, in its project to identify the discrete cognitive processes leading to risk judgements and decisions, does not incorporate the complexities of risk rationalities. Like other cognitive psychological and psychometric models of risk assessment and decision-making it attempts to discipline emotion by placing it into a model or a relationship of cause and effect, rendering it into a variable that may be measured and its effects calculated. There is little if any space here for recognising the ambivalences, contradictions and ambiguities of risk rationalities, the movement back and forward between feeling 'at risk' and feeling 'safe', the dynamic and heterogeneous contexts in which risk rationalities are constantly configured and reconfigured.

Sociocultural perspectives on emotion

For writers within sociology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural geography and cultural studies, emotional responses to risk are conceptualised very differently compared with psychological models of behaviour. Rather than emotions being understood predominantly as inherent, involuntary responses to stimuli such as threats or dangers, they are viewed as themselves social constructions, produced through shared understandings and past experiences (Lupton 1998, Davidson and Milligan 2004, Thrift

2004, Davidson *et al.* 2008). Emotions are viewed as intensities that flow through and between individuals and things. They are fluid, relational and highly contextual. They have histories, building on previous experiences and discussions with others or collective memories. They have cultures and are located within specific spaces. They are collective: they are not simply or only personal, individualised experiences but may also be shared between people, circulating between bodies (Ahmed 2003, 2004). As cultural geographers writing about emotion have argued, features of space and place are important in the production and expression of emotional states (Davidson and Milligan 2004, Thrift 2004, Davidson *et al.* 2008). They claim that emotions are only understandable, made sense of, in the contexts of particular spaces, in what they term an 'emotio-spatial hermeneutic' (Davidson and Milligan 2004, 524).

So too, a relativist position on risk views it as constructed via sociocultural processes rather than as a pre-existing entity (Lupton 1999a, 1999b, Fox 2002, Tulloch and Lupton 2002, van Loon 2002, 2005). Risks are always virtual, in the process of becoming: they are potentialities, both 'constructed realities' and 'real constructions' that are comprised of complex networks of materialities, procedures, regulations, discourses and strategies – and emotions (van Loon 2005, 40). Risk, because it involves an incipient rather than a realised threat or danger, is about projecting ideas into the future, about imagining the consequences of an action or event. Risk judgements allow one to place oneself into a future scenario, when something might go wrong and threaten one's health, finances, possessions or wellbeing or that of one's intimate others. Phenomena – events, people, social groups, objects – are defined as 'risks' when they are considered to be threatening in some way to an individual or a community. To call something a 'risk' is to draw attention to it and recognise its importance to our subjectivity and wellbeing (Lupton 1999a, 13).

Judgements about what phenomena should be called 'risks' are influenced by the social and cultural context and by personal experience, including the embodied sensations that are defined as 'emotions'. Risk rationalities are not static; they are not necessarily predictable; they do not necessarily follow predictive models of behaviour; they may contradict each other. When individuals weigh up risks or decide what a risk is, they are making assessments of the social meaning of phenomena and their place within cultural norms. They are deciding how these phenomena cohere with their values about what is acceptable and harmless against what is dangerous or threatening. They are making judgements based on affective and aesthetic sensibilities that incorporate such aspects as personal taste and sense of style, bodily dispositions, awareness of concepts of time and space, membership of subcultures, unarticulated assumptions, imagination, intuition and pre-conscious affects and the interpretation of signs and symbols (Lash *et al.* 1994, Lupton 1999a, Lash 2000, Lupton and Tulloch 2003, Binkley 2009).

Both 'emotion' and 'risk' are inevitably embodied because, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, we are embodied subjects and experience the world through our bodies and our

senses. Our experiences and our judgements are always part of our 'being-in-the-world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Further, we are constantly relating to and responding to other bodies, so our embodiment is never individual. Indeed the increased interest in emotion in cultural geography has been inspired by recent writings on the body. It is argued that the most intimately felt geography is the body, which is also the site of emotional sensation and expression. Emotions take place within and around the body as it moves through space and interacts with other bodies and with objects. Emotions are therefore located in bodies and in spaces (Davidson and Milligan 2004). Emotions are 'a crucial element of the body's apprehension of the world' and 'a vital part of the body's anticipation of the moment' (Thrift 2004, 67).

Part of what the focus on space, place and the production of emotion is able to offer is recognition of the shifting dynamics that are inherent in the embodied nature of risk rationalities. Our bodies are constantly in movement and entering and leaving different spaces and places throughout the day. This approach is also able to incorporate the material world into understandings of embodiment and subjectivity, including objects as well as place and space. It emphasises that we interact with different others, whether they are human or non-human, living or non-living, and our senses are engaged differently depending on the places we inhabit and the things with which we interact. Just as emotion is interembodied, so too is risk. Just as emotion is a process, so too is risk. Both concepts of risk and emotion express moral judgements within a specific historical, cultural, social and political context. Both emotion and risk are intersubjective, produced through social relations. They are ways of making sense of situations, naming responses, part of the diverse cultural meaning systems that we use to try and understand the world.

This approach does not deny that there are embodied features of emotional experience or that material dangers do exist in the world that it would be wise to avoid. Rather it claims that these embodied/material dimensions are always interpreted via social and cultural lens, predicated on individual past experiences as well as social and spatial location. We name certain embodied sensations as 'emotions' based on our interpretation of them. So too, we name certain phenomena as 'risks' based on our interpretation. Just as 'nothing is a risk in itself' (Ewald 1991) until we label it as such, a physical sensation is not an emotion until we give it that name.

I suggest, therefore, that rather than referring to an affect heuristic related to risk perceptions, judgements and decisions, the terminology of the 'emotion-risk assemblage' might be better employed. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari and writers in science and technology studies on actor network theory, the concept of the assemblage incorporates affect as well as a constellation of many other elements: ideational and material, human and non-human, living and non-living (Marcus 2006). From this anti-essentialist perspective, both 'emotion' (Mulcahy 2012) and 'risk' (van Loon 2002) are viewed as configurations or assemblages of diverse phenomena,

including each other. Both emotion and risk interact with each other and in the process, configure each other. Emotions create risks and risks create emotions. They are each produced through other material and non-material phenomena: individual and collective memories and experiences, discourses, practices, objects, space and place, flesh.

Beyond the rational/irrational distinction

In my final minutes, I want to critique the distinction that is so commonly drawn in psychological and lay discourses between cognition/reason as rational and disembodied and emotion as embodied, contaminating or distorting reasoned thought. In response, some writers have sought to demonstrate that emotional responses may be considered eminently rational. As some philosophers of emotion have pointed out, emotional responses may serve as important ways of evaluating situations and of providing important ethical insights. From this perspective, emotions are a form of cognition, wisdom and knowledge, frequently involving moral assessments of what is important to us (Nussbaum 2004), including those related to the acceptability of risk (Kahan 2008, Roeser 2011). Just as emotions may be viewed as an integral dimensions of moral evaluations, so too risk judgements can be seen as normative statements of morality (Rigakos and Law 2009).

These arguments have resonances with those put forward by some proponents of the affect heuristic model, who claim that what they view as the 'instinctive' emotional response of the 'experiential system' may at least sometimes lead to accurate judgements of risk. These writers do display rather an ambivalent attitude to emotion, however, particularly when they contend that emotional responses can also be dangerously 'misleading'. It seems that in this argument that as long as emotional responses conform to expert assessments of risk then they are 'accurate' or 'appropriate': if not, they are 'manipulative' or 'deceptive' (Slovic *et al.* 2007), producing the 'clashes' that are described as eventuating in the 'risk as politics' formulation. So too, some of the philosophers of emotion referred to above who argue that emotion may provide important ethical insights also claim that some emotional responses (such as disgust) are unjustly stigmatising to certain social groups and therefore should be challenged as to their appropriateness (Nussbaum 2004).

I would question why it is important to define the rationality or otherwise of emotional responses or, by association, risk judgements that are deemed to be influenced by emotion. I would go even further by suggesting that such a distinction is difficult, if not impossible, if we acknowledge the socially contextualised, dynamic, shared, heterogeneous and often contradictory and ambivalent nature of any kind of human response to the world. If we accept that our responses are always subjective and constructed through culture, is it even worthwhile or productive to attempt to identify emotion as separate from rationality or cognition, given, as I have argued, that these are intertwined. Can a risk judgement ever be purely dispassionate, with no 'contaminating'

emotions affecting it? Particularly if it is accepted that our responses to the world are at least partly shaped by unconscious or pre-conscious affect, then are we ever able to access or be fully aware of all the emotional elements of our responses? Just as all thought and reason is inevitably emotional (Ahmed 2003), just as science itself is essentially and inevitably an emotional enterprise (despite dominant counter-claims to the contrary) (Alderman *et al.* 2010, Pickersgill 2012), so too is everyday experience. From the perspective I want to take on emotion and risk, risk cannot separately be categorised as 'feelings' or 'analysis', as claimed by Slovic and colleagues (Slovic *et al.* 2004). Risk is both of these simultaneously.

I do not wish to engage in the argument that we should view emotional responses as somehow just as rational or 'truthful' (or even more so) than cognition and hence attempt to give them a sense of legitimacy that is so often denied them in risk analysis discourses. This argument simply preserves the separation of embodiment and cognition and the privileging of rationality. Because I want to avoid the rational/irrational distinction, I do preserve the arguments reviewed above that highlight emotion as relating to moral judgement and evaluation, a form of ethical reflection.

Finally, I agree with Thrift's suggestion that emotional response is 'a form of thinking, often indirect and non-reflective, it is true, but thinking all the same' (2004, 60). This is partly what the exponents of the affect heuristic are trying to get at in their argument for the value of emotion (at least sometimes) in making risk judgements and decisions. Unlike them, however, Thrift is very insistent on the point that emotions are neither irrational nor sublime, but instead simply 'a different type of intelligence about the world' (2004, 60). This concept of emotion, I would suggest, offers a productive way forward in thinking about the emotion-risk assemblage.

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