

4 The Use of Narrative to Explore Risk in Everyday Life¹

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Introduction

Many working in the field of narrative have come to think of narrative as ubiquitous, particularly following the much hailed ‘turn to culture’, and the concomitant turn to discourse and narrative across the humanities and social sciences. Catherine Kohler Riessman makes the optimistic assertion that ‘[t]he burgeoning literature on narrative has touched almost every discipline and profession. No longer the province only of literary study, the “narrative turn” in the human sciences has entered history,, anthropology and folklore, psychology, sociolinguistics, and sociology’ (Riessman, 2002: 696). Riessman goes on to note that ‘[t]he professions too have embraced the narrative metaphor, along with investigators who study particular professions. These include law, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy and social work’ (Riessman, 2002: 696). Yet it remains the case that the narrative turn has not yet reached all social sciences; and far from all the professions – risk researchers and risk analysts, for example, have yet to turn to narrative research in any sustained manner. This paper discusses the challenges of introducing narrative research into a field of research which has conventionally been dominated by technical and scientific approaches, relying on realism and positivism, and which has tended to represent people’s decisions around risk in terms of choices between monetarised costs benefits. In this context risk has been defined as ‘the probabilities of physical harm due to given technological or other processes’ (Lash and Wynne, 1992: 4). However this paper argues that recent efforts to introduce narrative methodologies in empirical risk research have been constrained by the limited critique of value/s informing much risk decision research; and that a more interpretative understanding of value/s opens up much more creative possibilities for narrative research in exploring people’s everyday experiences of risk. There is an urgent need for a midlevel approach to risk, which wends a way between Ulrich Beck’s abstract, but nonetheless persuasive, metanarrative of ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992), and his recognition of

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the importance of personal biography in an age of increasing individualization, and which attends to the exigencies of the need to make decisions about risk in critical policy contexts. This paper opens up questions about whether and how personal risk biographies might be invoked in developing methodologies for examining risk, methodologies which enable a theoretically sophisticated and critical account of the circulation and mobilisation of risk discourses in neo-liberal western democracies, and yet which also enable interventions in critical decision-making processes around sites of risk.

The issue of research on risk and decision-making has a particular urgency. Risk has emerged as a significant frame used in policy-making to determine decisions about resource allocation in situations of possible harm. To give just one example: in the UK the nuclear industry is at a turning point. Nuclear reactors built in the 1960s are now reaching the end of their 'life', and thus far in the UK two reactors (at Hinkley Point and Bradwell) are being decommissioned, with further decommissioning planned. This process raises a number of crucial questions – about the future of the nuclear industry, about the possibility of building new nuclear facilities at existing sites, or at new sites, but even more immediately this process raises questions about dealing with radioactive waste as there is currently no national storage for intermediate level nuclear waste in the UK. The UK government aims to find a site for storage by 2040. These changes in the nuclear industry raise a host of policy questions about how to make decisions, about who is to be involved in decision-making, and most crucially about what is to count as knowledge to be considered in the decision-making processes – just scientific and economic 'facts', or the storied concerns, opinions, values and experiences of people living in nuclear communities?² These questions are particularly crucial for communities most immediately affected by the nuclear industry. While the issue of nuclear decommissioning is one of national, and of course, global significance (as environmentalists have argued, and as the explosion at Chernobyl has demonstrated, nuclear radiation, like many other environmental pollutions has no respect for national boundaries), nonetheless it is the case that the populations most affected are those in the immediate vicinity of plants. Furthermore the nuclear industry in particular has been beset with criticisms of secrecy, and there has been a widespread public distrust of the nuclear industry. Thus the issues raised by the decommissioning process, and any suggestion of building new nuclear power stations, require sustained efforts by

² The communities living around Bradwell nuclear power plant in Essex are the focus of a project at the University of East Anglia, which draws on narrative methodologies to explore how communities live with sites of significant socio-technical risk, and the values which people mobilise when talking about their everyday lives in these areas. A further case study will be around Stansted airport. This project forms part of the ESRC Priority Network on Risk, Social Contexts and Responses to Risk (SCARR). See <http://www.kent.ac.uk/scarr/>.

the nuclear industry to convince people that the industry has been transformed.³

Techno-scientific Risk Research

Much existing empirical work on risk has emerged out of the fields of economics and psychology, and has conventionally understood people's decisions around risk in terms of economic values, as choices about monetary costs and benefits. As well as stressing a purely economic frame for understanding people's decisions about risk, such approaches have also tended to assume that populations have static perceptions of risk. Cognitive psychologists and decision researchers have focused their efforts on trying to identify patterns of individual perceptions of risk, and trying to predict people's responses to possible risks. In this research people's perceptions of risk are often related to their degree of technical expertise, or assumed degree of technical expertise, thus 'experts' are understood to be knowledgeable on a topic, and members of publics are assumed to be 'ignorant', and their responses to risks are often presented as irrational.

There have been a number of responses to these trajectories in risk research. The emergence of the field of risk communication, and efforts by industry and science to increase the 'public understanding of science', is one engagement with this framing of risk. Some researchers have presented perceptions of risk in terms of individuals' structural relationship with society, pointing to the relevance of class and gender, for example, in ways which treat these categories as simple variables (Flynn, Slovic et al., 1994; Graham and Clemente, 1996; Finucane, Slovic et al., 2000). However a more theoretically-informed approach would address the role of risk discourses in constructing notions of otherness (cf. Lupton, 1999).

One attempt to address some of the limitations of economic valuations of environmental concerns emerges from work in the field of psychology which has focussed on the importance of people's values in informing decisions around risks. Some psychologists have critiqued the assumption that values are fixed, stable and enduring, and have instead posited a 'constructed values' approach, arguing that people's values are constructed in the process of deliberating about preferences and beliefs, particularly where these relate to

³ To give just a small indication of how this distrust of the nuclear industry, and the government's implication in the industry, persists from initial fieldwork around Bradwell, all people interviewed thus far have been aware of the possibility of building a new nuclear facility at Bradwell, and a number have speculated aloud that the research was initiated by the government to ascertain local community feeling about a new power station at Bradwell.

intangible or unfamiliar issues (Fischhoff, 1991; Payne, Bettman et al., 1992; Gregory, Lichtenstein et al., 1993; Pidgeon and Gregory, 2004).

To date work which attempts to elicit people's values has relied extensively on survey research, as in traditional contingent valuation (CV) methods which try to estimate the economic value of public goods. In the context of environmental issues this means the economic value of environmental improvements and damages. CV approaches posit 'a hypothetical market value for an unpriced good and asks individuals to state the dollar value they place on a proposed change in its quantity, quality or access' (Gregory, Lichtenstein et al., 1993: 177). Those who developed the concept of 'constructed values' have been critical of the traditional CV approach, and have expended considerable energies trying to adapt old tools and develop new tools which would address a notion of 'constructed values'. Gregory, Lichtenstein and Slovic, for example, argue that CV surveys should be adapted so that they provide further support to individuals in the process of trying to quantify elements of life which they have not traditionally represented in terms of economic values, in order 'to build a defensible expression of value' (179), believing that traditional CV surveys 'impose unrealistic cognitive demands on respondents' (178). A further critique of the traditional contingent valuation approach is that it abstracts values from the context in which they were produced. However in the work of constructed values theorists, context is here understood in the limited sense of the way in which questions are framed in CV surveys (Gregory, Lichtenstein and Slovic: 179; Payne et al.), rather than the broader context of people's everyday lives.

Drawing on this constructed values research, and working initially within a decision analysis framework, Terre Satterfield has opened up new questions about more context sensitive methodologies for exploring and eliciting people's environmental values (see also Burgess and Limb, 1988; Henwood and Pidgeon, 2001). In particular Satterfield has begun to think through the possibilities of a narrative approach to values and risk (Satterfield and Gregory, 1998; Satterfield, Slovic and Gregory, 2000; Satterfield, 2001). Satterfield has developed a number of tools for eliciting people's values, including a decision-pathways questionnaire (Satterfield and Gregory, 1998); eliciting commentaries on 'narrative' and 'utilitarian' texts (Satterfield, Slovic et al., 2000); and eliciting narratives in response to visual imagery (photos of old-growth and clear-cut forests) (Satterfield, 2001). However, although Satterfield is interested in narrative, she appears more specifically interested in narrative valuation, that is, in situating a valuation and decision problem in the context of narrated stories, rather than in engaging in a narrative analysis of how values are constructed, mobilised and circulate in risk narratives. When she does explicitly elicit narratives from respondents, she reduces these 'hundreds of pages of written responses' (2001: 340) to 25 categories of values, rather understatedly noting that '[i]dentifying the different invoked value expressions

was understandably difficult' (2001: 340). Satterfield developed these categories of values from a reading of environmental philosopher, Holmes Rolston's text, *Conserving Natural Values* (1994). She 'culled each chapter for discrete types of value' (340) and in this process generated categories of values which she then identified in the narratives produced by her respondents. Yet this very process reveals how values are as much constructed by the researcher, as the respondent, a thorny question which does not receive any reflection. Satterfield's work then tends to reify notions of values, limiting her development of narrative methodologies in the context of risk and decision research. Satterfield's engagement with narrative remains bounded by the exigencies of decision research. This is likely to be less a lack of awareness of the potential complexities of narrative, and more a strategic recognition of precisely how the ambivalences and messiness of narrative work might be received in the context of decision research.

Thus, despite the use of the term 'constructed', this is not a social constructivist perspective on risk or values. Rather the notion of 'constructed values' emerges from experiment, from behavioural decision research, revealing an epistemological commitment to a positivistic and realist conception of risk and values. The literature on constructed values fails to pay much attention to questions of human agency in the construction of risk. As Gusterson has noted, when there is attention to agency, 'it is the agency of the risk presenters, not the risk-consumers, that is fore-grounded' (Gusterson, 2000: 335). As a result this literature struggles to account for the fluidity of people's understandings and constructions of risk, and the emergence of particular constructions and mobilisations of risk in particular (local) contexts, or the particular role of people's narratives, discourses, and rhetoric in constructing, and importantly, contesting notions of risk. Values could rather be seen as produced in discursive networks, and in which people assume multiple positions, and thus have (apparently) incoherent value sets. Furthermore, the process by which people work through different and possibly conflicting values, might be a very important focus for research, in trying to understand the decisions and actions that people might take on the basis of their values. Thus rather than asking 'what' values people invoke – a research question which has produced efforts to quantify and measure values, reifying and fixing values in the process – a constructivist/interpretative approach would rather ask 'how' values are mobilised in conflicts over environmental risk, and 'why' people mobilise particular values. As Lash and Wynne have argued, 'the dominant paradigms of risk, for all they have taken on the trappings of liberal pluralism, remain firmly instrumentalist and reductionist' (Lash and Wynne, 1992: 3-4). Research, such as that by Satterfield, bears the traces of this tussle between narrative and positivism.

Biography in Risk Research

Given the overwhelming dominance of quantitative methodologies in empirical risk research, the lack of attention to more interpretative approaches is perhaps not surprising. However, Ulrich Beck, the most renowned social theorist on risk, while frequently criticised for his lack of empirical research, has nonetheless firmly pointed to the importance of narrative, as personal biography, in his account of *Risk Society* and reflexive modernisation. Beck has argued that the shift from industrialisation to risk society is marked by a transition from struggles over the distribution of wealth to struggles over the definition and distribution of risk, and a shift from a society structured by social classes to an individualized risk society. In Beck's account, the individualization of risk has produced a need for reflexivity, and for the construction of personal biographies in conditions of uncertainty and indeterminacy brought about by a decline in traditional sources of meaning such as the nuclear family and class structures. While the lack of attention to narrative in techno-scientific risk research can perhaps be explained by the different genealogies of different strands of risk research, and the continuing lack of cross-communication between the disciplines, the neglect of attention to Beck's account of biography in work such as Satterfield's, which does try and turn to narrative, is a curious oversight. However Beck's sweeping metanarrative of risk society 'risks' achieving closure at the level of theory that cannot be achieved in everyday life, hence the need for empirical research.

The Risk of Narrative

Approaches which try to incorporate economic values for different environmental goods into cost-benefit analyses, producing optimal social welfare choices, have been controversial. They have been challenged from philosophical and cultural perspectives in particular, which has led to a reappraisal of the importance of public involvement in decision-making about risk and in determining environmental values. This paper, and the project out of which it emerges, arise out of a desire to address the challenge to develop methodologies which can adequately understand and represent the complex production of values, by publics and stakeholders, in the process of working through decisions around living with and managing risk, so that the lives of those most affected by decision-making can more actively and intimately be brought into decision-making processes.

A focus on values, particularly values as currently constituted in much of the empiricist risk research, precludes wider attention to subjectivity, identity and experience in people's lives, and how risk judgements and decisions might be embedded in everyday life and personal (risk) biographies. A more

thorough critique the notion of value/s underlying the economic model of risk research could provide a comprehensive critique of the realism and positivism embedded in this work, and the assumption of an autonomous individual engaging in rational choice on the basis of financial costs and benefits to the individualized self. Such a critique could expose the *values* embedded in empiricist risk research, that is, economic values and capital. Academic and policy researchers are themselves motivated by highly ideological values related to the history of their disciplines. Economics has presented itself as value free, but environmental philosophers and feminist theorists (not necessarily mutually exclusive categories) are two groups of theorists who are working to reveal and make explicit the values and assumptions underpinning neo-classical economics.

Narrative methodologies open up a number of possibilities in social science research. In contrast to theories that impose a mechanistic model of human behaviour, narrative emphasises the active engagement of people in constructing meaning in their lives. Narrative methodologies offer an ‘act of resistance’ to hegemonic social sciences which fail to recognise the multiplicity and complexity of stories the people tell about their lives. Narrative methodologies also enable exploration of how social phenomenon are embedded in a ‘web of communication’, and how narratives circulate and are taken up and rejected by different people and groups at different points in time (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997).

Rather than proffering new theories of risks, this paper stresses the need for innovative methodologies for exploring and understanding people’s experiences of living with risk, and for bringing these experiences into decision-making contexts. Narrative methodologies would allow the exploration of the construction of values in and through the stories that people tell about living with risk in everyday settings, starting from the assumption that everyday risks are apprehended, confronted and perhaps survived, through telling stories about them. Because risk is an effect of temporality, narrative, with its inherent temporal dimensions, provides a basic way of managing risk, and narrative offers an exemplary methodology and epistemology for comprehending risk in everyday life. While narrative research holds out the hope and the possibility of reconciling the tensions of empiricist risk research and the sophistication risk in social theory, of finding ways to manifest people’s values, and perhaps to bring these personal accounts to decision-making processes, it isn’t possible to predict whether introducing narrative methodologies into the field of risk research will enable all that one would hope for. Narrative research may even undercut anti-hegemonic intentions precisely because it reveals so much messiness, a messiness that makes it difficult to construct the kind of clarity and robustness of argument often required in policy contexts. However changes in the field of risk communication and management, ‘from an emphasis on providing information

about probabilities to promoting dialogue amongst parties (see Fischhoff, 1995), have had profound implications for the ways in which governments view the limits and possibilities of their own engagement with stakeholders and the wider public' (Pidgeon and Gregory, 2004). The risks of continuing with empiricist research at a time when a whole new nuclear future is being opened up, are perhaps enough to suggest that the moment for developing narrative methodologies in risk research has come.

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