Using Focus Group Research in Exploring the Relationships Between Youth, Risk and Social Position

by Dave Merryweather
Liverpool Hope University

Sociological Research Online 15(1)2
<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/15/1/2.html>
doi:10.5153/sro.2086

Received: 16 Apr 2009 Accepted: 6 Jan 2010 Published: 28 Feb 2010

Abstract

This paper draws upon current research to consider the value of the focus group method for exploring the relationships between youth, risk and social position. Groups comprising young people occupying similar social positions were used to generate talk about aspects of everyday life regarded as risk. Through the processes of conversational interaction facilitated by the focus group method, participants co-produced detailed risk narratives, understood here in Bourdieu's terms as product and producer of the habitus related to social position. Using data from several of the focus groups I illustrate how the method was especially useful in generating narratives indicative of how risks were experienced and understood in different ways according to social positions of class, gender and ethnicity. Such risk narratives also reproduced distinctions between and within different social positions. Consideration is given to certain limitations of the focus group method in respect of this research. Ultimately, however, the ability of the method to generate collaborative narratives reflective of shared social position is viewed as an invaluable means for developing a rich and nuanced account of the relations between youth and risk.

Keywords: Focus Groups, Youth, Risk, Social Position, Distinctions

Introduction

1.1 In this paper I draw on current research to demonstrate how focus groups can be used to explore relationships between youth, risk and social position. Research is concerned with examining how material experiences and understandings of risk relate to the social position occupied by youth. While the research utilises key concepts developed by Bourdieu (1984; 1990) such as habitus, practice, distinction and social space, I follow recent researchers who have negotiated these into a 'looser, more pliable and contingent set of relations' (Bennett et al. 2009). Consequently, while attention is focused partly on social class, the significance of age, ethnicity and gender is also considered. This paper considers the methodological aspects of this investigation, particularly how focus groups can be used to generate dynamic conversations which are illustrative of how material experiences and understandings of risk relate to position in social space.

1.2 Focus groups were used to explore aspects of everyday life that young people aged 14-24 defined as risk. Groups were generally homogenous in composition, comprising participants who shared positions in social space. It was found that groups occupying particular social positions narrativised risk in particular ways, citing different material experiences of risk and discussing these according to different culturally-embedded meaning frames when compared to groups occupying other social positions. Further, discussions were characterised by the multifarious forms of interaction that typify everyday conversations. In this respect, focused discussions proved valuable in generating co-produced narratives of those risks associated with each group's respective everyday life. This helped elucidate the shared meaning frames through which risks were understood which are related to the habitus at specific intersections of gender, class and ethnicity. This in turn allowed for a consideration of the complex relationships between youth, risk and social position and how, through processes of dynamic conversational interaction, distinctions according to social positions are reproduced.

1.3 I begin the paper by briefly outlining the overarching research investigation into youth, risk and social position. I suggest that to understand this relation it is necessary to acknowledge that definitions and practices of risk are situated in the context of young people's own everyday lives. This allows risk to be

conceptualised in terms of its relation to the material conditions of everyday life and to the habitus associated to social position. I then discuss why focus groups are especially useful for exploring how young people occupying different social positions experience and understand risks in different ways. This is followed by a discussion of data from four of the focus groups, showing how the method was applied in generating collaborative accounts of everyday risks. Finally, I reflect on some of the limitations of the focus group method in respect of this research, paying particular attention to how different group compositions or the use of interviews may have generated very different data. In the conclusion I reassert the value of the focus group in making visible different understandings of risk which are patterned according to position in social space.

Youth, Risk and Social Position: Why Use Focus Groups?

2.1 Contemporary youth are routinely associated with risk, whether this concerns risks associated with youth-to-adult transitions (Furlong and Cartmel 2007) or risk activities practiced as part of contemporary youth lifestyles (Green and Singleton 2006; Plant and Plant 2006; Winlow and Hall 2006). The specific concern of my research however lies with exploring how youth both experience different material risks and understand these in different ways according to social position. Material practices and understandings of risk are viewed in Bourdieu's (1984; 1990) terms as relating to the habitus. The habitus inculcates in those occupying similar positions in social space a shared understanding of the social world and disposes them to engage in similar practices, including those related to risk. However, whereas Bourdieu's focus concerns how habitus, practice and distinctions inform the reproduction of class positions, here I draw on insights developed by contemporary researchers who have extended these concepts to an understanding of other social positions such as age, gender and ethnicity (Mitchell, Bunton and Green 2004; Crawshaw 2004; Silva 2005; Silva and Wright 2005; Bennett et al 2009). Such material experiences of risk and their relationship with social position are explored here using focus group discussions.

2.2 The value of the focus group as a method in which small numbers of people discuss a topic of interest identified by a researcher has been well documented (Morgan and Krueger 1993; Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson 2001; Litosseliti 2003). Specifically, focus groups are social contexts characterised by the forms of communicative interaction and meaning making found in everyday conversations (Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 2004). Unlike methods such as one-to-one interviews data are generated through group dynamics whereby the moderator encourages participants to ask questions of one another, swap anecdotes and comment on others' experiences, opinions and ideas (Myers 1998; Kitzinger and Barbour 1999). Further, focused discussions are invariably informed by factors relating to social position. In recounting topics participants draw on their material experiences of everyday life. But they do so through culturally-embedded meaning frameworks of that materiality which are product and producer of the habitus. Focus groups do not therefore simply access material experiences; they elucidate shared understandings and explicate how these reveal themselves in practice (Callaghan 2004). This is particularly prevalent when groups are constructed according to homogeneous criteria of identification which allows elements of peer relations to come to the fore, facilitating discussion of common issues and experiences and allowing participants to relate each others' comments to actual events in their shared daily lives (Kitzinger 1994; Morgan 2006). As such, the focus group was considered a valuable means for exploring relationships between youth, risk and social position inasmuch as focused discussion could elucidate how material experiences and practices around risk varied and how understandings of these were informed by the habitus at the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity.

The Focus Groups

2.3 For the research sixteen focus groups were conducted consisting of 96 young people aged 14-24. Participants were drawn from a cross-section of society so as to account for variations in material experiences and understandings of risk. Permission was sought from head-teachers, youth workers and a senior academic at a local university to approach groups of young people with a view to recruiting participants. This enabled me to provide an overview of the research aims and objectives to potential participants and request research volunteers. Those expressing an interest were subsequently provided with a letter providing further details of the research and outlining participants' rights as regards confidentiality and anonymity. On confirming their intent to participate recruits were asked to sign a consent form and to complete an additional form identifying social characteristics such as age, gender, social class and ethnicity which were used in compiling individual groups. [1]

2.4 To facilitate discussion of shared experiences of risk as related to similarities in social position focus groups were constructed so as to be homogeneous according to gender, social-class, ethnicity and age (See Table 1). Focus group discussions were held in the school, university or youth club from where participants had been recruited. This decision was based partly on recognition of the logistical problems associated with conducting groups in other locations (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999), and partly on the grounds that a familiar setting would contribute to a more relaxed environment conducive to in-depth discussion (Hopkins 2007).

Table 1: Focus Group Profile.

Focus Group	Age	Gender	Ethnic Group[1]	NS-SEG[2]	Location	No. in Group
1	19-24	Female	W-B	1-3	University	7
2	19-24	Male	W-B	1-3	University	5
3	19-24	Female	W-B	1-3	University	4
4	16-18	Female	W-B	1-3	6th Form	6
5	16-18	Male	W-B	1-3	6th Form	3
6	16-18	Female	W-B	4-5	6th Form	7
7	16-18	Male	BME	4-5	6th Form	6
8	14-15	Male	W-B	1-3	Youth club	7
9	16-18	Male	W-B	1-3	6th Form	9
10	16-18	Female	W-B	1-3	Youth club	8
11	14-15	Male	W-B	4-5	School	6
12	16-18	Female	W-B	4-5	6th Form	4
13	14-15	Male	BME	4-5	School	4
14	14-15	Female	BME	4-5	School	7
15	16-18	Male	BME	4-5	6th Form	5
16	16-18	Female	BME	4-5	6th Form	8

1. W-B = White British, BME = Black and Minority Ethnic
2. National Statistics, Socio-Economic Group

2.5 In moderating focus groups an open-ended biographical approach to generating discussion was used. Groups were initially divided into smaller sub-groups which were tasked to discuss activities recently engaged in regarded as risky. Sub-groups then provided summaries of these activities to the rest of the group. Further discussion was stimulated by me asking participants which of the issues identified in the preliminary activity were regarded as most significant and to illustrate this by using examples from everyday life. Such an approach served several purposes. In particular, it enabled participants to set their own agenda, discussing issues that reflected their own 'hierarchy of importance' and to speak about these in their own terms (Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 1999). Related, this ensured participants' own subjectivised risk hierarchies were privileged (Mitchell et al. 2004), the issues identified reflecting the materiality of everyday life according to social position and being discussed according to their culturally-embedded meaning frameworks. Further, the preliminary activity helped participants take ownership of the research process (Kitzinger 1994), facilitating discussions characterised by the sorts of dynamic interaction, interruptions, redirections, joking, teasing, completion of each other's sentences, excitable speech, co-operation, argument and so forth that typify everyday conversations (Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 2004). It was through such interactions, both between participants and with me as moderator, that accounts of risk and everyday life were negotiated and reproduced.

2.6 Through such dynamic conversational interactions each group co-produced accounts of the materiality of risk associated with their respective everyday lives. Where similar risk issues were raised these were often discussed according to different culturally-embedded meaning-frames and interpretive repertoires (Wetherell 1998, 2006), indicating how habitus disposes people towards different understandings and practices according to the specific intersections of class, gender and ethnicity (Bennett et al. 2009). To illustrate I now discuss data from four of the focus groups. The first two examples are taken from Focus Groups 4 and 16 which comprised six white, middle-class women and eight working-class women from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds respectively. The next two cases are Focus Groups 9 and 15 which consisted of nine white middle-class men and five working class men from BME backgrounds. Participants in these groups were all aged 16-18. In this regard, one might expect their experiences and understandings of risk to have been broadly similar. However, they are particularly illustrative of how different material experiences and understandings of risk relating to different social positions may be brought to the fore through the conversational interactions generated by the focus group method.

Risk, Gendered and Racialised Identities: Female Youth

2.7 In the preliminary activity the white, middle-class women in Focus Group 4 identified a broad range of everyday risk practices including: travelling as passengers in cars with friends who had either not passed driving tests or were newly qualified drivers, using sun-beds, travelling alone in private-hire taxis, witnessing fights involving other young people, being in the city centre of a night-time and alcohol consumption. Subsequent to reporting initial discussions to the rest of the group I then asked participants to expand on these examples further. This led to discussion becoming increasingly elaborate and dynamic with considerable conversational interaction between participants and with me as moderator.

2.8 Through this interactive process the women co-produced a risk narrative in which practices around alcohol consumption in particular were constructed as normal, routine aspects of everyday life. The gendering of material cultural practices is less significant amongst young men and women who increasingly engage in similar activities (Bennett et al. 2009), including risk practices such as alcohol consumption. This was reflected in the group's risk narratives in which alcohol consumption was often discussed in terms emphasising its pleasurable aspects, highlighting here how certain risk practices may provide excitement and enjoyment to risk takers (Green and Singleton 2006). Nevertheless, through the course of focused discussion the women co-produced a risk narrative in which pleasurable aspects of alcohol consumption were juxtaposed with alcohol-related risks, including threats of violence and sexual harassment or assault associated with drinking in the city centre. This is illustrated in the following extract:

> **Leah**:[2] But when you're in town you don't realise, like I just got dead upset once and just walked through town, from one side of town to the other on me own
>
> **Rebecca**: and left me running after you on me own
>
> **Leah**: and then when you go home and think about it you realise that anything could've happened, but when you're there you don't, its not on your mind
>
> **Hannah**: You don't think anything
>
> **Leah**: Yeah, like I wouldn't do that again cos even five minutes later I stopped and thought, 'I could have just died or something'.
>
> **Moderator**: What happened then, what was the situation?
>
> **Rebecca**: We was in a party and she got angry or upset about something
>
> **Leah**: and then tried to go and find someone who was on the other end of town and I was waiting for people to go with me and then just got dead angry and went on me own
>
> **Rebecca**: I was, I was going to come with you wasn't I and went 'look after my bag while I go and get Amy', and then some lad was standing there with me bag and I was like 'where's she gone' and she was like right down the other end of town, just walking around town
>
> **Moderator**: So you had to go chasing after Leah trying to find
>
> **Rebecca**: Yeah, I found you with Claire didn't I just sitting in the middle of town
>
> **Leah**: Yeah, cos like something could have happened to her then like she was coming to find me
>
> **Rebecca**: I weren't bothered about me though, just the fact you were gone and I didn't know where you'd gone

2.9 This fragment of conversation provides a vivid illustration of the materiality of risk as experienced by these young white, middle-class women for whom alcohol consumption and related risks were constructed as everyday practices. Engaging in dynamic conversational interaction, the women drew on shared experiences and memories of these to co-produce an account of a specific risk event, in this instance, involving a night out when Leah had behaved irrationally on account of having consumed too much alcohol and had left her friends to roam across the city-centre on her own. This in turn was understood as having put both Leah and her friend, Rebecca, at risk of some form of assault, expressed here by Leah's comment that 'anything could have happened to her' (Rebecca) and by extension, to Leah herself.

2.10 The extract is particularly illustrative of the value of the focus group method in bringing such material experiences of risk and the shared meaning frames through which these were understood to the fore. While the use of interviews here is likely to have elicited only a partial, one-sided account of this risk event, the interactive process pivotal to the focus group method enabled a much richer account to emerge. In this respect, as moderator I was able to facilitate discussion using prompts and back channel utterances (Myers 1998), confirming the issues raised as legitimate topics of conversation and encouraging participants to further elaborate their narratives. This encouraged further conversational interaction in which the women directed discussion to one another as well as myself, finishing off each other's sentences and prompting each other to elaborate further.

2.11 Such in-depth discussion was aided by both the perception of safety in numbers and the diffusion of the researcher's influence afforded by the focus group method (Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 1999). In the context of a one-to-one interview with an older male researcher, the young women may have felt reluctant to discuss practices around alcohol consumption and other related risks. Yet, while focused discussion

remained oriented towards me as moderator (Kitzinger 1994), the ability to work collaboratively in a safe environment meant such inhibitions were circumvented, the women feeling sufficiently at ease to discuss shared experiences of risky behaviour. As a result, the women went on to discuss other related risk practices including shared fears of having drinks spiked and the threat of sexual assault, as well as admissions of involvement in fights with other young women and of taking lifts with strangers when drunk.

2.12 In this respect, through focused discussion these young white, middle class, women co-produced a narrative account of material risk practices associated with their particular social position. Many everyday practices were co-constructed as risk with considerable significance being ascribed to alcohol consumption in particular. Yet, through the safety afforded by the focus group context the women constructed themselves as active risk-takers. In this respect, narratives were performative of feminine identities transgressive of traditional restrictive gender stereotypes (Lupton 1999), illustrating here how risks were understood according to the habitus of the specific intersections of gender, class and ethnicity.

2.13 The material practices and understandings of risk generated by this group differed significantly from those discussed by the young working-class, BME women in Focus Group 16. Again the preliminary activity helped establish a strong group dynamic, the women engaging in conversational interactions through which accounts of their everyday lives were constructed. Unlike Focus Group 4 however, reflecting a differential relationship with the material world (Silva and Wright 2005), talk focused on a much narrower range of risks. The primary focus here was shared experiences of racism with the women providing examples of having felt out of place in certain white-dominated spaces, including a graduation ceremony, shopping centres and an airport. Following the initial activity I asked participants to expand on these issues. This resulted in participants elaborating their accounts further, again working together in sharing personal experiences and encouraging each other to tell their stories. Individual or shared experiences of racism frequently led to other group members building these accounts by adding their own narratives. In so doing, the group co-produced a detailed account of everyday life in which racism was constructed as the primary risk associated with their social location.

2.14 Of particular interest in this group however, was the absence of reference to active risk-taking. BME women tended to either discuss risk in generalised terms, or to project risk onto the experiences of friends and relatives outside of the immediate group. This tendency is evident in this next extract. Here, underlining the role played by the moderator in introducing new topics (Myers 1998), I had asked the women how media concerns around youth and knife crime corresponded to their own everyday lives. The issue of media representations was evaded, illustrating once again the democratic potential of the focus group method in enabling participants to discuss what matters to them. Instead, the women immediately shifted discussion onto the experiences of third parties, one of the women, Asal, referring to an incident in which a male cousin had been chased by white youths carrying knives. The women then broadened discussion onto knife crime more generally, producing the following dialogue:

> **Raima**: when people think 'oh lads goin' out with knives' they think of black lads
>
> **Several**: Yeah, yeah
>
> **Raima**: no, but I reckon it's all lads anyway
>
> **Ruksana**: exactly, it can be anyone
>
> **Several**: [excitable speech (2.0) – inaudible]
>
> **Ruksana**: but when people think about it they just think 'oh erm, black lads and knives' and that but, but it's all over the city, no matter where you are
>
> **Anila**: yeah, all around is the same, well not the same but like similar, whoever hangs around
>
> **Amita**: it's how you're brought up isn't it, it is
>
> **Ruksana**: it's not only black lads that hang round, it's white lads hanging round who do it

2.15 The extract again illustrates how focus groups generate conversational interactions through which material experiences and culturally-embedded understandings of risk are made visible. In this instance Raima, Ruksana, Anila and Amita drew on shared experiences and culturally-embedded meaning frames to co-produce a narrative account of knife-crime. Through interaction the women negotiated their meanings of risk, sharing opinions and experiences and, through the use of the 'extreme case formulations' (Pomerantz 1986, in Potter and Wetherell 2001:204) such as Ruksana's assertion that knife crime is 'all over the city', co-constructed knife crime as an everyday risk. However, in generalising accounts of knife crime the women, as elsewhere in this discussion, collaboratively distanced themselves from such risk behaviour. Rather, reflecting their shared social position at the intersection of gender, class and ethnicity, their narrative revealed how risky behaviour such as knife crime was understood as a normalised feature of masculinity. Indeed, in projecting knife crime onto 'all lads' the co-produced narrative served to position the women as risk-averse and non-violent, marking a point of distinction between themselves and an aggressive, potentially violent, masculine other. This was reaffirmed more emphatically later in the discussion:

> **Moderator**: Do you ever feel threatened yourselves in that way, y'know kind of knives are quite common, but do you ever feel threatened yourselves like
>
> **Ruksana**: not as a girl no

Several: [excitable speech – inaudible]

Amita: it's boys

Anila: when things happen it's lads not girls

Ruksana: I mean I feel scared for like someone abusing me and shouting abuse cos that's just not as nice y'know what I mean, but you'd be more scared as a lad

Moderator: Yeah, Anila yeah.

Anila: If we if we were to get stabbed or hurt in some way it would be by a girl it wouldn't be a boy

Raima: a boy wouldn't do it to a girl

Anila: and girls, girls wouldn't carry knives, they just fight you normally, they wouldn't even do that.

2.16 Focused discussion of risks associated with violence was again informed by reference to specific material experiences and culturally-embedded understandings of what constitutes normal behaviour for young BME women. In this respect, illustrating how through conversational interactions gendered identities are achieved (Silva 2005), the group again co-produced a gender distinction between a violent, physically aggressive masculinity on the one hand, and a non-violent, relatively traditional femininity on the other. Related, the absence of reference to direct forms of risk-taking behaviour also reproduced distinctions between these women's femininity, co-constructed here in fairly traditional terms of female passivity, and the more active risk-taking femininity characterising the narrative of white, middle-class women in Focus Group 4. In this respect, the interactive process immanent in focus group research helped elucidate not only shared risk practices which were informed by respective social position, but also the meaning frames at specific intersections of gender, ethnicity and class through which these were understood.

Risk, Gendered and Racialised Identities: Male Youth

2.17 That focus groups are conducive to exploring relationships between youth, risk and social position is further evidenced here with a discussion of two groups comprising young males. Focus Groups 9 and 15 both constructed risk as routine aspects of their respective everyday lives. As with the two groups of women however, they differed both in terms of the material risks highlighted and the meaning frameworks through which these were understood. Further, these groups were particularly noticeable for the very different ways in which accounts of risk were co-produced through focused discussion.

2.18 In Focus Group 15 comprising young BME, working class men, the preliminary activity saw participants quickly take active ownership of the discussion. This was enhanced further by my invitations to elaborate further on those issues identified which again helped to generate a dynamic, interactive focused discussion. Indeed, these young men appeared to welcome the opportunity to discuss at length specific issues which were clearly of concern and this contributed to the generation of an immensely rich focused discussion. As with the young BME women the main risk issue identified here concerned shared experiences of racism. Even where I attempted to broaden the discussion by asking about other forms of risk the conversational topic was routinely re-oriented back on to racism, illustrating again how focus groups can tilt the balance of power away from the researcher and allow participants to set their own agenda (Kitzinger 1994). Through the process of focused discussion racism was therefore co-constructed as a risk practice characteristic of the everyday lives of these young BME, working class men. In this instance however, discussion focused more explicitly on direct experiences of racism, including being routinely stopped by police, witnessing racially motivated violence and suffering verbal racist abuse. A typical example from this group's discussion is evident in the following extract:

Nwankwo: … like an old man, I was waiting for him to like - do y'know when you get on the bus and I just stood back and watched and he went 'nice one you nigger' and I was like 'what! If you was younger I would have kicked your arse, I would've broke his, I would've broke his stick or something like that

Several: [laughter]

Hasan: Old people like - someone was getting off the bus as we get on and he goes to erm, he was an old man but he goes to my dad like, an me little sister's there, he goes 'oh you Pakis are trouble, all you Pakis are trouble' like

Mod: What, just saying it straight to his face, like that?

Hasan: Yeah, like my dad's just laughing at him cos he's old, you can't do nothing, he's an old man.

Nwankwo: break their legs or something, y'know

Dwight: Even in [city], like we drove passed [district] and me mum asked for directions off this fella and he starts going 'what?' And then he goes to his mate 'the monkeys want directions!'

Several: [laughter]

Dwight: and starts going 'ooo ooo ooo' [monkey sounds] and I went to my mum 'let's get out this car right now'. I was shocked! I was shocked! Because my mum's quite peaceful, but I was like 'let's get, let's batter them' cos there was like three of them yeah, and I went 'let's batter them now' I was 'I'm sure we've got something in the boot'.

Several: [laughter]

2.19 This fragment of conversation in which Nwanko, Hasan and Dwight recalled individual experiences of racist abuse was typical of much of this discussion; clearly for these young men such experiences were commonplace and were understood as risky aspects of everyday life. In this respect, such material experiences and the meaning frames through which they were understood were indicative of the relationship between youth, risk and social position at the specific intersection of gender, ethnic and class habitus.

2.20 The extract further illustrates the interactive process through which accounts of the social were constructed, and how through these focused discussion participants performed identities in particular ways. In constructing racism as risk the young men continuously negotiated and renegotiated the meanings of this according to material experiences and shared culturally-embedded meaning frames. This production of risk narratives was very much a collaborative endeavour, the men finishing off each others' sentences, wrestling with each other for control of the conversation, and relating each others' accounts to actual incidents occurring in their everyday lives (Kitzinger 1994). Further, as illustrated by Nwanko's and Dwight's respective utterances above, the young men used both each other and myself as moderator as an audience for whom to perform (Myers 1998; Smithson 2000). A prominent feature of these performances was the eliciting of laughter which played an important function in the collaborative generation of risk narratives. As Mueke (1970 in Waterton and Wynn 1999) notes, laughter may be an expression of helplessness and resignation at the situation faced by those on the margins; in this instance representing an ironic response to the day-to-day realities of racism. Related, laughter here was noticeably empathetic, conveying recognition of the familiarity of such racism. Laughter in this context supported the speakers (Hak 2003), encouraging participants to further develop their respective accounts of racism and therefore contribute to the development of a co-produced risk narrative.

2.21 Focused discussion was also characterised by gendered performances which differed significantly from those evident in the group of young BME women. Whereas the latter had tended to project risk onto others the young men talked about racism in ways that were performative of a tough masculinity. For example, both Nwankwo and Dwight expressed a desire to avenge their abuse via physical force. Such talk reproduced an understanding of a working class masculinity marked by physical toughness (Connell 2005; Canaan 1996) often viewed as generated and contested within African-Caribbean (O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000), as well as other, BME cultures. Similar tough talk was evident throughout this discussion, the young men co-producing accounts of conflicts with white youth and acts of bravado regarding encounters with police in ways that were performative of a tough masculinity.

2.22 However, these performances of masculinity were continuously re-negotiated through the interactive process of focused discussion and while the young men talked tough, this was often nuanced in quite important ways. For instance, references to threats of violence were typically constructed as legitimate defensive reactions to unprovoked racial abuse, echoing Sewell's (1997) point that black masculinities are explicable as a collective response in a racist culture. Related, the young men performed masculinities in ways that positioned themselves as rational and respectful non-aggressors. Narrated responses to racism were tempered by an implicit rejection of unprovoked, senseless violence (Frosh Phoenix, Pattman 2002) with physical responses to racism being threatened rather than actually used. Hence, in the above extract Dwight spoke of restraining himself on account of appeals from his mother whereas Nwankwo and Hasan both constructed violent reactions as inappropriate on account of their respective assailants' age.

2.23 It is through the conversational interactions that are an endemic feature of the focus group method that such shared experiences of racism and the culturally embedded understandings of what constituted an appropriate response were made visible. In a manner unlikely to be evident in interviews alone, these young men co-constructed a rich account of risks as experienced and understood at the intersection of class, gender and ethnicity. Related, group interaction entailed specific performances of masculinity. This is not to say that the focus group method revealed a more authentic version of their masculine identities (Frosh, Pattman and Phoenix 2002). Rather, my point is that focused discussions elucidated the shared culturally-embedded group norms and values through which responses to racism were understood; in this instance, a masculinity characterised by toughness on the one hand, but eschewing an excessively violent or aggressive masculinity on the other.

2.24 In Focus Group 9 which comprised white middle-class males, the preliminary activity generated discussion of experiences of risks involving contact with groups of other young men, playing truant from school, alcohol consumption and witnessing fights in the city centre. Asked which of these were most salient, the consensual view was that alcohol and the presence of gangs were the most common risky aspects of their respective everyday lives and subsequent discussion focused primarily on these topics. As with other focus groups subsequent discussion was generated by dynamic conversational interactions prompted by me as moderator asking participants to elaborate further on the examples of risk activities identified, introducing new topics and managing interactions where necessary. What made this group especially interesting however, was the degree of conflict and tension evident between certain members of the group, the group dynamic being greatly influenced by previously established power relationships (Reed and Payton 1997).

2.25 One of the young men, Mark, occupied an ambiguous 'outsider' status within the group. Although middle-class in terms of NS-SEG criteria, on commencing focused discussion it became apparent that

Mark occupied a higher social class position. Mark lived in an affluent suburban part of the city and was very well spoken. He was also much smaller in stature than others in the group. As discussion unfolded it became apparent that Mark's material experiences of risk and the culturally-embedded meaning frameworks through which these were understood were significantly different from those of the rest of the group. There was also a clear tension between Mark and three of the other young men in particular. This was manifested in overt teasing and frequent attempts to ridicule and undermine Mark's contributions to discussion. This had a significant impact upon the overall group dynamic. While clearly able to defend himself, Mark nevertheless had to engage in heated discussion and argument by way of ensuring his voice was heard. Related, as discussion progressed I found myself increasingly protective of Mark, exercising a greater degree of control as moderator by way of including him in discussion and managing interactions so as to diffuse any hostility directed towards him.

2.26 Such pre-existing power relations informed both how risk was narrativised and how distinctions according to social position were reproduced in the process of focused discussion. This is evident in the following extract which occurred as participants were reporting examples of risk-taking identified in the preliminary activity. Here Liam expands on an account of having been 'binge-drinking' at a friend's house at the weekend.

> **Moderator**: And, and what were your binge-drinking exploits?
>
> **Liam**: Erm, a bottle of Vodka
>
> **Mark**: As if you did!
>
> **Liam**: I did!
>
> **Mark**: A whole bottle? How big was the bottle? How big was the bottle?
>
> **Sam**: You weren't there!
>
> **Liam**: It was only a little one.
>
> **Mark**: Alright then
>
> **Moderator**: Right so half litre was it?
>
> **Liam**: it's about a third of a litre
>
> **Mark**: You'd need your stomach pumped if you drank a big one
>
> **Several**: [laughing]
>
> **Mark**: You would!
>
> **Liam**: I've been in a house and like me brother's, me brother's mate's drunk like a whole, a whole big one – each!
>
> **Moderator**: A whole what?
>
> **Mark**: Each?
>
> **Liam**: Like a regular size one like that in a night – they can drink like a whole bottle of vodka in a night and not get a stomach pump
>
> **Mark**: You'd need, you'd need your stomach pumping or something
>
> **Several**: [inaudible – laugh]
>
> **Moderator**: [inaudible] that's what it was, yeah. So you've seen people drinking
>
> **Liam**: I've seen people do it, yeah!
>
> **Moderator**: Mark, you're totally disbelieving that anyone could drink a bottle of vodka?
>
> **Liam**: [to Mark] you're smaller, you're smaller so you can't take – like hold your ale or …
>
> **Several:** [laughter]

2.27 This fragment of conversation occurred very early on but it set the tone for much that followed. As was evidenced throughout this research, focus groups typically entailed processes of collective sense-making as participants negotiated and re-negotiated meanings of everyday life (Wilkinson 2004). In this group however, it was through explicit argument and disagreement as evidenced in this extract that different material experiences of risk and different meaning frames through which these were understood were brought into relief. Further, this form of conversational interaction, similar to that occurring in everyday conversations helped elucidate the dynamic processes of negotiation and contestation through which distinctions according to classed and gendered identity positions were reproduced.

2.28 Liam's account of alcohol consumption was informed by the habitus at the specific intersection of

class and gender at which such risk practices have their own 'cultural logic' (Crawshaw 2004:230). Heavy drinking has long been associated with a tough, working-class, 'hegemonic' masculinity (Connell 1987, 2000, 2005; Canaan 1996) and Liam, although middle-class, performed his gender in such terms, highlighting Mac an Ghaill's (1994) observation that gender and class intersect in complex ways. But this initial performance was troubled by Mark who overtly questioned Liam's claims. Drawing on different material experiences and different interpretive repertoires, Mark deployed his own 'rhetoric of reason' (Sewell 1997), challenging Liam's claim to have consumed such levels of alcohol. In doing so he at once undermined Liam's claim to a hegemonic masculinity and performed his own masculinity in a way which drew a clear distinction between himself and Liam. Liam's response was to repair his positioning to maintain a sense of his masculine identity being of value (Wetherell 1998) by reasserting his original claim. However, Mark's persistency led Liam to firstly downgrade the status of the bottle of vodka to 'a small one', an act which simultaneously repositioned his own masculinity, and secondly to shift the focus away from his own risk-taking behaviour by claiming to have witnessed the consumption of whole bottle of vodka by other young men. Finally, Liam launched a counter-attack of his own, drawing attention to Mark's small physique. In this he too reproduced a distinction around class and gender, positioning Mark in terms of a subordinate masculinity (Connell 2005), as a weak and inferior man who lacked the authority to speak on issues such as alcohol consumption. This was confirmed by others through laughter which, unlike that expressed by the young men in Focus Group 15, was ridiculing in tone, functioning to consolidate Mark's positioning as marginal to the group.

2.29 The extract highlights how focus groups can be used to explore different experiences and understandings of risk according to different social positions. Liam's discussion of alcohol as an everyday risk practice accorded with the collaborative account generated by the majority of this group. However, this brought both Liam and other group members into conflict with Mark who, occupying a different social position, experienced and understood alcohol consumption in quite different terms. As such, the conflict immanent in this focused discussion elucidated different experiences and meanings of risk. In this respect, conflict helped render visible the processes through which distinctions around class and gender were narrated and reproduced. It is difficult to see how such rich and nuanced data could be generated via the use of interviews.

Reflections on the Use of Focus Groups

3.1 Focused discussions proved useful in exploring the relationships between youth risk and social position. Yet, there were some limits to the method in respect of this research which require consideration. Firstly, despite my best efforts in formulating focus groups, few were wholly homogeneous. This did not in and of itself constitute a problem; as Kitzinger (1994) notes, some differences can be an important in the co-production of narratives. However, the presence of differences raised questions about the character of risk narratives generated had groups been heterogeneous. The inadvertent presence of a dissonant case in Focus Group 9 highlighted how conflict and tension according to different social positions could bring different material experiences and meanings of risk clearly into relief. Designing groups with the specific purpose of generating conflict would be unethical; yet, groups comprising individuals occupying more varied social positions may have proved fruitful in further exploring such different experiences and meanings. Of course, one can only speculate as to the form such narratives may have taken; but it is probable that these would have elucidated very different aspects of the relationship between youth, risk and position in social space.

3.2 Focus groups were designed to be homogeneous partly on the grounds that heterogeneous groups were felt to be less inclined to talk (Myers 1998). Indeed, using heterogeneous groups in the manner noted above may have been counter-productive in this respect. Yet the use of homogeneous groups, particularly where these were based around pre-existing peer groups, may itself have inhibited discussions. Group processes can silence dissonant voices, either through fear of peer disapproval, the censure of deviation from group norms (Kitzinger 1994; Smithson 2000; Stokes and Bergin 2006), or simply the conversational inclination for preferred agreement (Myers 1998). Further, individuals may dominate discussion with the result that other voices are silenced or marginalised (Hollander 2004). Such processes can be amplified when using pre-existing peer groups, participants succumbing to group culture (Mendes de Almeida 1980 in Reed and Payton 1997) with existent power relations and shared norms undermining the assumed democratic potential of the method. Certainly, throughout this research some individuals were more vocal than others while pre-existing power relations undoubtedly influenced the character of discussion. Efforts were made to circumvent this with participants afforded the opportunity to air their respective experiences and viewpoints through the use of moderator strategies such as direct questioning, back channel utterances and invited disagreement (Myers 1998). However, the nature of group dynamics meant that the possibility of narratives not being reflective of the views of all participants remained.

3.3 A further factor potentially inhibiting discussions concerned the positionalities of both myself and participants (Hopkins 2007). My position as a 44 year-old, white male researcher is likely to have influenced risk narratives in different ways according to the specific composition of each group. While some groups appeared sufficiently empowered so as to feel comfortable discussing a range of risk behaviours others appeared more reticent. Risks with the potential to cause embarrassment or distress, or necessitating admissions of 'deviant' behaviour, such as drug-use and risky sexual practices, were largely absent in these narratives. This may simply have been on account of such practices not featuring in the everyday lives of certain groups. But it is also possible that some topics were avoided due to my own positionality or the presence of known others. For example, active risk-taking may not have featured in the everyday lives of the young BME women in Focus Group 16, hence their tendency to generalise discussion of risk. Yet, it is also possible that this was a defensive strategy which made discussion of risk safe for these women. Conversely, some narratives were characterised by boasting, bragging, showing-off and play-acting, both myself and other participants functioning as an audience for particular performances (Myers 1998; Smithson 2000). This may have led to exaggerated or distorted risk narratives. Liam's claim to have consumed a full bottle of vodka in Focus Group 15 was modified following Mark's challenge: but

how many other such exaggerated claims formed part of the group narratives? Likewise, the responses to racism claimed by the young BME men in Focus Group 15 may have had more to do with the tough talk central to their performances of masculinity than to actual events in their respective everyday lives. In this respect, some caution is required in reading risk narratives as accurate accounts of the everyday lives of young people in this research.

3.4 These limitations raise the possibility that alternative methods, particularly in-depth interviews, may have proved more helpful in exploring relationships between youth, risk and social position. This would not have addressed problems of positionality which would necessitate using researchers occupying similar social positions to participants (Smithson 2000). Yet, interviews would at have least allowed individuals to discuss experiences of risk in a more confidential setting, enabling exploration of those issues that mattered most to them in a context uninhibited by the presence of others. Certainly experiences of racism have been found to be more likely to be discussed in interviews than in group settings (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2004; Hopkins 2007), raising the possibility that experiences of other risk issues may have been better investigated using this approach.

3.5 However, this would be to miss a key point regarding my research aims. On the one hand, use of interviews would have simply tilted the balance of power back in favour of myself as researcher, removing the safety in numbers afforded by the focus group method (Wilkinson 2004). This would most likely have rendered individual's experiences and concerns less visible given that there would have been little opportunity for participants to negotiate their own agenda in such a research context. Further, while interviews may well have generated individualised risk narratives this does not mean these would be more authentic. All research contexts are sites of performance, participants performing in different ways and generating different sorts of data according to this context (Kitzinger 1994; Smithson 2000; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2004). As such, interviews may well have generated different risk narratives, but not necessarily ones that were more truthful than those co-produced in focused discussions. Overriding these issues however was the fact that my emphasis lay with exploring shared experiences and meanings of risk according to the habitus at the intersections of gender, ethnicity and class. As such, what was expressed in a group context was deemed just as important, if not more so, than anything that might have been expressed in interviews (Kitzinger 1994).

3.6 Accounts of risk may very well have varied according to both the composition of focus groups or the specific research method employed. However, what was at stake here was not the veracity of the claims made by individuals, but the ways in which shared experiences and understandings of risk revealed themselves in, and were reproduced by, conversations with others occupying similar position in social space. As such, while acknowledging the limitations of the focus group method, it made sense to use an approach that utilises conversational interactions in co-producing risk narratives.

Conclusion

4.1 By using focus groups comprising young people occupying different social positions this paper has drawn attention to three important points regarding the value of the method in exploring the relationships between youth, risk and identities. Firstly, the examples discussed exemplify how focus groups can be used to explore how young people experience the materiality of risk according to class, gender and ethnicity. Each of the groups identified quite different issues as risky aspects of their respective everyday lives, bringing into relief the extent to which people have differential relationships with the material world according to position in social space (Silva and Wright 2005). Hence, for black and minority ethnic working-class youth risk was understood narrowly in terms of experiences of racism whereas for white middle-class youth, a much broader range of activities was highlighted, including alcohol consumption, conflicts with other youths, and the risks associated with the city-centre night-time leisure activities.

4.2 The second point is that focus groups proved to be a valuable method for bringing different culturally-embedded understandings of risk into relief. Groups comprising young people sharing social position were able to actively define the research agenda, ensuring that their own focal concerns were privileged. This allowed participants to explore common experiences of the risks characteristic of their respective everyday lives. Further, unlike in interviews, participants were able to negotiate and re-negotiate particular definitions and understandings of risk through dynamic conversational interaction between themselves and me as moderator. Youth are not a homogeneous group. They do not experience the same risks. Nor do they necessarily understand risk in the same ways. Rather, definitions of risk reflect young people's 'socially embedded and culturally meaningful discourses' associated with social position (Mitchell, Bunton and Green 2004; Crawshaw 2004). In this respect, knowledges and understandings of risks such as alcohol consumption, being in the city centre when drunk, knife crime and racism, are product and producer of the habitus associated with the social positions of class, gender and ethnicity and the specific intersections of these. In allowing participants to engage in conversational interaction, focus groups enabled these different meanings and understandings of risk to come to the fore. While recognising some of the limitations of focus groups in this respect, it is difficult to see how such rich risk narratives would have been generated through the use of interviews.

4.3 Finally, focus group discussions enabled examination of how culturally-embedded knowledges and understandings of risk function as markers of position in social space. As I have argued in this paper, risk is understood as a form of social practice which is both product and producer of habitus (Bourdieu 1984). Consequently, risk practices as defined within collaboratively produced risk narratives narrate and reproduce a range of distinctions according to different social positions. This is evident throughout each of the focus group conversations with young people discussing risk practices in ways that reproduced distinctions not just according to class, gender and ethnicity, but also within each of these categories. In this respect therefore, focus groups offered a valuable method which enabled the development of a rich and nuanced account of the complex relationships between youth, risk and identities.

Notes

[1]In the case of focus groups 13 and 14 this necessitated the granting of parental consent also.

[2]By way of protecting the identities of participants pseudonyms have been used throughout.

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