

**Who participates? Differing perceptions of risk by young people  
and the impact on strategies for youth participation**

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# Who participates?

## Differing perceptions of risk by young people and the impact on strategies for youth participation

Conversations with two groups of young people in Queensland were used to explore how they experience risk. The groups placed very different emphases on two types of risk – technological and embodied. The authors argue that this difference is due to each group’s position within the risk society: one group, which consisted of young people experiencing homelessness, were ‘at-risk’, while the other, a youth advisory committee, acted as a buffer between youth at-risk and risk society. These results raise the question as to how such divergences in perception can be taken into account when developing youth participation policy and procedure.

by Adele Pavlidis  
& Sarah Baker

**Y**outh participation has been conceptualised in three main ways: individual, collective and formal (Bell, Vromen & Collin 2008, p.29). In this paper we focus on formal youth participation – the process whereby organisations explicitly seek the opinions and views of young people and take these into account in their decision-making processes. As observed by Judith Bessant (2004), “over the last decade, the idea of youth participation has once more become a popular part of contemporary political talk in both Australia and in many Western societies” (p.387). In some ways youth participation has become a “policy cliché” (Bessant 2004, p.387) and although much has been done to avoid some of the problems associated with youth participation in decision-making processes (Bell, Vromen & Collin 2008), this article moves beyond problem-solving, and instead focuses on some of the theoretical issues in contemporary sociological thought regarding risk and youth and what this might mean for understanding youth participation.

Ulrich Beck’s concept of a “risk society” (1992) has become a popular tool in the sociological study of youth. The concepts of risk and risk society have implications for how we understand identities, the structure and organisation of societies and also the key concepts which underlie sociology, including class and gender (Cieslik & Pollock 2002, p.2). Beck argues that a risk society is a stage in the development of late modernity in which traditional norms and values that once acted as cultural guides are no longer structurally fixed, which results in changes to our experience of the

family, employment and community (Cieslik & Pollock 2002, pp.2-3). The shift to individualisation in late modernity is linked to an increasing awareness of, and responsibility to control, risk; and, in the case of young people, much academic literature, policy and legislation posits them to be “at-risk”. This position of being “at-risk” embeds young people into the risk society at the world level. They are “at-risk” at the same time as they are at risk.

This article does not take Beck’s category of “risk” to be the same as institutional/governmental ideas of “at-risk”. Beck’s “risk” is the way that people live in the world, the risks they imagine and therefore attempt to avoid, regardless of the likelihood of these risks occurring. The institutional/governmental idea of “at-risk” identities is found within varied disciplines such as criminology, psychology and social policy, and refers to statistical correlates of problem behaviour (Case 2006, p.174). These two types of “risk” have each gained momentum in recent decades and a number of sociologists have found it useful to examine them together (France 2008; Kelly 2006; Miles 2007; Threadgold & Nilan 2009). This article examines the way that young people who are identified as “at-risk” negotiate risk in their own worlds. It also illustrates how young people who are not “at-risk” – but who are advocates for “at-risk” youth – understand risk.

This was a small study and we therefore offer no sweeping conclusions. Rather, in drawing on conversations with two different groups of young people aged between 20 and 25 in Queensland, we explore how two contrasting types of risk – technological and embodied – come to be highlighted. As the article reveals, the two groups placed a very different emphasis on each of these forms of risk. We argue that this is due to each group’s position within the risk society: the group of young people experiencing homelessness were “at-risk” while the youth advisory committee acted as a buffer between youth at-risk and risk society. This leads us to question what such a divergence in perception might mean for models of youth participation in decision-making processes. Before moving on to the discussion of the young people’s perceptions of technological and embodied risks, we provide more detail about each of the groups involved.

## Background

Focus groups were conducted with each group of young people between August and December 2008. Both groups were pre-existing collectives, with the youth advisory group working together in a professional capacity and the homeless youth living together as friends and family. For both sets of participants, the first questions posed in the initial focus groups were very general, asking how they knew each other, their ages, where they were born and what they hoped to achieve from the research process. Each group was then asked a small set of broad questions which sparked further, more detailed discussion. Questions asked included:

- What are the most important issues for young people?
- What are the biggest risks in society?
- What is the hardest thing about life for you at the moment?

As the research was inspired by a reflexive approach, the transcripts of the first focus group session were given to the participants and used to guide discussion in the follow-up focus group, making a total of four focus groups, with each set of focus groups consisting of two sessions. By having the participants reflect on and clarify their initial responses, it was hoped to encourage self-analysis and allow the participants the opportunity to clarify their initial responses.

The data from each set of focus groups were then compared and contrasted to find what, if any, major differences were apparent in the ways the two groups perceived and managed risk. Two distinct themes emerged: technology, as the main risk focused on by the youth advisory group, and the body, as the focus of the homeless youth’s responses. These two themes provide an interesting contrast to the many ways that young people can and do negotiate and mediate risk in contemporary society. Participants’ real names have not been used.

### The youth advisory group

The youth reference group meets monthly and focus groups were conducted at two consecutive meetings in August and September 2008. At the youth advisory focus groups there were six

youth participants (see Table 1).

Also present at these focus groups were two older participants: Jane, a 40-year-old female community development worker who is the facilitator of the youth advisory group, and Donna, a 50-something woman currently working in a management position for the state government. This small group is illustrative of Howard Williamson's (1997) observations about participants in youth consultation being literate, motivated and articulate. As such, the focus group participants were similar to other "youth consultation" groups (Williamson 1997). Though their backgrounds are various, the majority of them are involved in some way in the youth sector and this would affect their responses. Their knowledge of current issues affecting young people is perhaps greater than that of most other young people. Also, the fact that they work with "at-risk" young people poses a challenge to ideas about young people within risk society – that is, the issue of young people trying to manage other young people's risk.

### The homeless youth

There were both similarities and differences between the two sets of focus group participants. For the second set of focus groups we spoke with young people experiencing homelessness, as they represent a group of youth currently being targeted in public debate and government policy. They are also potential clients of the service to which the youth advisory group in the study is attached. The homeless participants were recruited from a youth service that provides referral and information to young people aged 12 to 25. A total of five young people agreed to participate in the research (see Table 2). These five young people were all friends who had been living together in a local caravan park and who had recently been evicted. They ranged in age from 20 to 24 years. Again, two focus groups were conducted, one in November 2008 and one in December 2008.

### Technological risk

When the young people in the youth advisory group were asked what they thought were the most relevant issues for them and other

young people, it was Donna, one of the older participants, who spoke first:

*I think young people are in a space where people have never been before because of ... modern technologies. You are more accountable than any other time in history; I came to this conclusion watching Mamma Mia ... this woman had [sex with] three quick guys in a row and then ... but now this couldn't happen cause of photographs and the mobile phone. You could never go away and have a quiet holiday somewhere, you are absolutely accountable, I don't know what the impacts are going to be longer term, but young people are, [going to have to cope with them] whether they like it or*

**TABLE 1** Youth advisory group participants

Name	Age	Occupation	Additional Information
Peter	24	Youth worker	University graduate
John	23	Nurse assistant	Recently completed drug rehabilitation
Leanne	24	Masters student	International student from Canada studying criminology
Kate	23	Youth worker	TAFE (vocational college) student
Alex	20	Child-care worker	TAFE (vocational college) student
Tina	22	Youth worker	University graduate

**TABLE 2** Homeless youth participants

Name	Age	Occupation	Additional Information
Keith	24	Unemployed	Homeless for 6+ years
Nela	23	Unemployed	Parents deceased, African background, homeless for over 5 years
Shamahni	24	Unemployed	Sister of Nela
Liza	22	Unemployed	Homeless for 4 years
Nicholao	24	Unemployed	Stays in contact with his parents, African background

*not.*

This comment reflects the writings of several theorists, as well as mainstream opinions on the dangers of new media and technology (see, for example, Chambers 2008 and ABC News Online 2009). In the second focus group, held in September in which Donna was not present, we asked the young participants what they thought

about her comments.

John was the first to respond on this issue of technology:

*... there are two sides to [new technologies], like there is always someone there to support you so there are good things [as well as the more negative aspects].*

The ability of new technologies to connect people has been widely espoused as “emancipating” (Davie, Panting & Charlton 2004). With over 93% of Australians aged 15 to 24 years owning a mobile phone (Galaxy Research 2004), the benefits of mobile phones are undeniable. However, like Beck, the youth advisory group members were more concerned with the unintended consequences of the proliferation of (new) technologies.

Tina commented on the more negative impacts of new technologies. She agreed with Donna’s original statement and then expanded upon it; she saw mobile phones as sometimes having a negative impact on young people:

*... because at work we have had to exit [out of the youth residential facility] heaps of people, because they record everything, are like outside and attacking a girl and five minutes [later] it will be on YouTube, we have found them beating a guy.*

These sentiments reflect current media representations of youth and new technologies (for example, ABC News Online 2009) where the issue of violence being disseminated via mobile phones becomes more of an issue than the violence itself. Peter agreed with Tina and said, “it comes up all the time”.

Tina’s subsequent reflections on the riskiness of technology are interesting as she highlighted the responsibilities that come with technology. She said, “you can never go crazy”, and there is “judgment, [because] other people know what you are doing if you [are doing] something bad”. These sentiments are in line with the concept of responsabilisation (Rose 2000), where “bad” choices become a matter of individual responsibility. Risk and uncertainty are increasingly experienced “subjectively and individuals are held more and more accountable for their own survival in a time when change is the only certainty” (Ball, Maguire & Macrae 2000, p.2).

Take for example Alex’s extended response:

*You can [interpret] things a lot different over those things [like MySpace and mobile phones]. Someone can send you a text message and you think “wow they are being a cow”, I know a lot of people who have gotten into fights and stuff because of that [misinterpretation] ... It’s a responsibility that I don’t think a lot of youth have taken on, they have the technologies and they know how to use it, but they don’t really know how it can affect people. If they blog something on MySpace, it can really affect another person if they go and say all this stuff about them. But they don’t really see they are responsible because they just think that once it is on there or they have sent the message it’s out of their hands then, but really it’s not, it’s affecting people.*

Here, Alex appears to have taken on the concept of “responsibilisation” – in the context of a focus group where he might be expected to take on such views – and articulates his thoughts on “other” young people in terms of not taking responsibility for the risks involved when using social networking sites. His extended response highlights this internalisation of responsibility; he believes those who experience negative effects from the use of social networking sites are solely responsible, regardless of their lack of resources or knowledge of the risks involved.

Following on from Alex’s discussion, John reflects on the risks and issues surrounding new technologies, commenting that “staying right in the present can be lost [or harder]”. This echoes sentiments of “new age” methods for managing risk. John goes on to say that “relationships aren’t as deep, like if you are chatting on the internet, it is not as deep”. In Bauman’s book *Liquid love* (2003) there is a discussion of mobile phones and their impact on relationships within contemporary society. Bauman notes John Urry’s observation that the “relations of co-presence always involved nearness and farness, proximity and distance, solidity and imagination” (2003, p.61). In light of this, Bauman sees “virtual proximity” as more in favour of “farness, distance and imagination” (2003, p.61), which reinforces John’s statement that relationships are not as deep because of new technologies.

Additionally, Alex says of mobile phones, "I need my phone; it is a type of security". The idea of mobile phones offering "security" is exemplified by the fact that for those accustomed to living with a mobile, travelling without it may truly be a risk (e.g. if in danger you can call for help). As Garcia-Montes, Caballero-Munoz and Perez-Alvarez (2006, p.77) argue "the cellphone becomes ... a kind of talisman against diverse risks". For these young people then, mobile phones are a security and a threat. They are at once empowering and oppressive, dangerous and necessary.

## Embodied risk

The homeless young people's responses in the second set of focus groups provide an interesting contrast to the issues raised by the advisory group. While the youth advisory group focused on new technologies, the homeless young people had a very different view of the main dangers for young people today. Beck's risk society thesis seems to be at play in the world of the youth advisory group, but for the homeless young people, there is no risk society, just the world they live in. Beck states that risk has overtaken class as the main concern of society, but this article disputes that notion. The homeless young people, with noticeably less social, cultural, educational and economic capital (Bourdieu 1990), are not concerned with the unintended consequences of late modernity. For them the risks they face have nothing to do with the products of modernity. The homeless young people operate within structures that limit their concerns to that which is immediate – their bodies. Beck argues that changes in society, technologies, globalisation and all things associated have overcome the "cultural reality of social class" (Beck 1992, p.87), and replaced it with the oppressive logic of risk. In the risk society, no-one is concerned with attaining something "good", but rather with preventing the worst:

*The dream of the class society is that everyone wants and ought to have a share of the pie. The utopia of the risk society is that everyone should be spared from poisoning. (Beck 1992, p.48)*

The homeless young people do focus on

avoiding "poisoning", yet what is obvious is that they need a "share of the pie". These young people face disadvantage because of their lack of capital, yet are labelled as "at-risk youth", with all the connotations and implications of this label that lead away from the realities of social class, and towards the "oppressive logic of risk" (Beck 1992, p.87).

The young people who were experiencing homelessness were concerned for their body. For them, risk and fear were situated within the body: they were afraid of abuse (sexual and physical) and sexually transmitted diseases. During the first focus group, when the researcher inquired as to the most important issues for young people, Nela asserted that it was, "homelessness, you see a lot of young people on the streets, they want help but, nah, they don't get it". Shamahni added that it was also "[a]lcohol, sexuality, drugs" and this was affirmed by Keith and Nicholao who respectively responded, "yeah, it's the drugs" and "drugs". Liza then contributed a further issue of concern – physical abuse:

*... the abuse ... you can ask any young person on the streets at the moment and the main reason they are on the streets is they see their mum experience domestic violence or they were getting hurt themselves.*

In the second, reflexive focus group the homeless young people were asked to consider their initial answers in regards to their own life experiences. Reviewing the transcript, Keith responded:

*It's not only violence, from my experience I have come across a fair few and it is a mixture of violence and sexual assault. A mixture of all different stuff.*

Liza then reinforced this by saying, "Sexual abuse, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, seeing it and you just want to get out of there, that's what I saw". To expand on what these young people thought was of greatest concern for themselves and other young people, we inquired as to what they believed, more generally, were the main risks of society. The group unanimously agreed that sexually transmitted diseases were the greatest risk in society today. For Nela the key risks are, "most of the STDs that people are

worried about". This is reinforced by Keith who added, "HIV, yeah you don't know who's got what these days. That would be my number one risk". Nicholao and Liza then responded respectively with "AIDS" and "chlamydia".

Why were sexually transmitted diseases so risky for these young people? Keith stated, "I would rather die", and Nela explained, "I would isolate if I got it". Without us questioning the group further, Shamahni began to describe how easy it was to catch STDs saying, "... drugs and needles you can get it". Liza expanded upon this adding:

*... there are many ways you can catch AIDS, that's why you are not supposed to use someone else's toothbrush, cause the blood from your gums can go to someone's mouth, and if someone bleeds and you touch it well then you are stuffed.*

In thinking about STDs, Keith then mentioned risk directly saying, "It is a big risk for the younger and the older community and there are a lot of people who have a phobia of catching it". For Liza it was, "also [a risk] for people who have used drugs in the past".

To qualify these responses, the group was asked whether they knew anyone who had contracted an STD, to which all participants responded in the affirmative. When then asked if there were any other risks they thought were important in society today Keith's response reinforced the issue of STDs:

*... the most things that really bothers me is catching any sexual diseases, HIV, and STDs or whatever is out there from blood streams.*

Liza interjected in order to connect the STD issue to other risks that had been mentioned earlier, saying that she:

*... guess[es] if you have been on drugs before then that could be a risk, especially on the streets, cause on the streets there are a lot of drugs, a lot of people shoot up on the streets.*

She then added:

*... another fear would probably be of being bashed, especially in the parks and stuff, I mean if you're with someone you know, you trust you will be all right, but by yourself it's a different story.*

Nela expanded Liza's comment on the risk of violence for homeless youth by explaining:

*... a lot of younger people are more at risk of being bashed because you're more vulnerable, cause if you are on your own you are more aware of what's going on, but being in groups you think you are safe and you don't think about it, and people are more likely to attack.*

These findings in relation to risk and the body are not unusual. For example, longitudinal research into the place of "critical moments" in the process of youth transition found that young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to report critical moments associated with death and illness than those from affluent backgrounds who focused on leisure and consumption (Thomson 2007, p.103). Rachel Thomson (2007) comments that the reason for this is a reflection of the contrasting "realities of the environments in which ... [young people are] growing up" (p.103).

Similarly, in the research reported in this article, we find that without access to the various resources of education, culture and other forms of capital, the homeless youth imagine their body as the point of reference for risk and its defence; articulating risk in a way that is significantly different from the young people involved in the youth advisory group.

The homeless youth's focus on embodied risks, rather than the externalised risks as expressed by the participants from the youth advisory group, somewhat goes against the basic premises of "risk society" theory. Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) state that the "notion of 'risk' is central to modern culture today precisely because so much of our thinking has to be of 'as-if' kind" (p.vii). Though the homeless young people are thinking in terms of "what if", their focus on embodied risks is not commonly found within the plethora of "risk society" literature. The risks they put forward are real: their affects and effects can be felt. For the homeless youth, STDs and abuse are the risks to be negotiated. For them, the avoidance of risk is the avoidance of social isolation. When Beck talks about the risk society, he underestimates the risk of social exclusion, which to these young people is the greatest risk of all. To be connected to other people, to be accepted within peer

groups, and to do this with a healthy body is what these young people saw as key factors for survival within the contexts of their lives.

## Conclusion

Though this research was small in scope and limited to only two groups of young people, the divergence in ways the groups articulated risk still raises questions about the positioning of young people in a risk society, including what this might mean for youth participation. According to Beck (2006) “risk” is a way of being in the world, but we argue this “being” is different according to the extent of a person’s accumulated capital and, subsequently, the resources available to them. For the group of homeless youth, embodied risks outweighed any of the technological risks raised by the youth advisory group. We argue that this difference highlights the key issue of the ability of the youth advisory group to advocate for youth at-risk – remembering that the homeless youth are the potential clients of the youth advisory group in this study. This article reinforces the call for the voices of marginalised young people to be heard directly and for these young people to be given a say in the decisions that affect them.

Bell, Vromen and Collin’s (2008) work on models of youth participation in decision-making processes addresses the issue of how to engage marginalised young people, but it does not provide theoretical reasoning as to why we should engage with marginalised youth. By starting to examine the ways that different groups of young people talk about risk, and the types of things they see as most “risky”, we can better identify specific groups of young people as they are positioned in the risk society. This will result in policy and care responses better suited to their concerns. It is only by first listening to young people and acknowledging the differences in their present situations that we can support them to make positive decisions in their lives, based on what they see as important.

By the time of their second focus group, the homeless youth had given some thought to the previous month’s discussions. Keith began the session saying:

*I have been thinking of ways that I can change the way I have lived in the past and I am hoping that everything will fall into place, and I have been thinking it would be good if the majority of youth services had a few more counsellors, especially young ones, people around their age that you could actually sit down and talk to.*

Nela agreed, adding:

*I have noticed that they like to speak to the younger ones because they can relate. It does make life easier if you can find someone [youth worker] around your age group who you can talk to.*

These two comments provide a direct link to the other set of participants in the research – the youth advisory group, a group of young people whose role is to support other young people. Yet the question remains as to how young people who experience the world and the risks of society very differently to those who need their support can effectively deliver meaningful services to them.

In the case of this research, the young people acting as “youth advisors” have very different perceptions of risk to the young people they are potentially advocating for. This has quite substantial ramifications, as the concerns of the youth reference group are the ones that will be addressed at that particular youth service, not the concerns of the young people who are most marginalised and who are potential clients of that service. Though we have started to see an increase in young people participating in decision-making within youth services around Australia, organisations must try harder to include those they aim to support in decision-making processes and must start trying to understand the world they live in and their perception of risk.

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