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The diverse logics of risk: young people's negotiations of the risk society

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Abstract

For the past five years I have worked with young people who had been labelled as “at risk”. I myself have entered into categories of “riskiness”, and I have often asked myself: how do young people perceive risk in contemporary society? This question forms the basis of this paper and from it stems other—no less important—questions about risk and young people. Youth are commonly posited as ‘at-risk’ in various literature, policy and legislation. This position of being ‘at-risk’ embeds young people into the risk society. Beck states that through the process of individualisation ‘people will be *set free* from the social forms of industrial society—class, stratification, family, gender status of men and women’ and that they will now have to choose their social identity (1992: 87 original italics). For Beck, this increase in choice is the primary cause of people’s anxiety and fear (1992: 87). Beck’s work focused on the ‘disappearance’ of inequality from government policy and the ‘agenda of daily life’ (Beck 1992: 92), yet this focus has actually served to perpetuate the shift away from inequality and structural concerns. For young people this movement away from structure has had many consequences, most notably the shift from ‘locally defined and enacted’ policy, to public policy focused on the ‘science of prevention’ (France 2008, p. 1) and the emergence of ‘at-risk’ youth identities; it individualises risk and makes youth and their families responsible for its effective management.

This research highlights key differences in the perception of risk between young people involved in a youth advisory group and young people experiencing homelessness. The young people who formed the youth advisory group expressed the notion of risk in relation to their use of new technologies, such as the internet and mobile phones, and articulated the ‘risks’ they see present in their world. Those young people were specifically concerned with risks to their body: violence and disease. According to Beck (2006) ‘risk’ is a way of being in the world, but, I argue, this ‘being’ is different according to a person’s social class and the resources available to them. As such, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus can constitute an important addition to discourses about risk and the risk society, particularly for those in marginalised groups. Through a focus on habitus and the embeddedness of risk for young people we can better listen to, and respond to, the risks articulated by them and start to understand that the way young people perceive risk is dependent upon their habitus.

At risk; at risk: young people in the risk society

How young people deploy themselves in the world and how they avoid risk is shown through this research to be undeniably situated within their habitus: with their resources, dispositions and bodies they seek to actively manage and avoid those risks

that they see as most detrimental. What young people seek is social inclusion—not how they ‘*ought* to operate’ (Harris and Williams 2003: 206) in society, but rather how they *want* to relate with, and connect with their peers. It is the risk of social exclusion, of isolation from their friends, networks and lovers, that young people seek to avoid; and they do this however they can. Beck’s understanding of risk can be seen as narrow in that he does not take into account the importance of connectedness to others as a priority, nor the ways in which class and status impact on people’s ability to manage this type of risk. The focus on risk and the perpetuation of ‘at-risk’ youth identities ignores the underlying causes of social exclusion and fails to support young people to mediate the risks that really matter to them.

Beck and the problematics of risk

Risk is a highly ‘productive’ discourse; in Australia and internationally, youth are commonly posited as ‘at-risk’ in various literature, policy and legislation as seen in countless government publications, funding applications, and websites for welfare professionals. This position of being ‘at-risk’ embeds young people into the risk society. Beck states that through the process of individualisation ‘people will be *set free* from the social forms of industrial society—class, stratification, family, gender status of men and women’ and that they will now have to choose their social identity (1992: 87 original italics). For Beck, this increase in choice is the primary cause of people’s anxiety and fear (1992: 87). This focus on anxiety and fear and theories of reflexive modernization has contributed to contemporary public policy focused on the ‘science of prevention’ (France 2008: 1) and the emergence of ‘at-risk’ youth identities. It has individualised risk and made youth and their families responsible for its effective management. This increase in ‘at-risk’ identities coincides with Beck’s

work, which has been primarily concerned with the ‘unintended consequences’ (Merton 1936; Woodman 2009: 247) of late modernity.

Bourdieu, reflexivity and the habitus

Steven Threadgold and Pam Nilan (2009) took Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, and Beck’s notions of reflexivity and risk, and synthesised these seemingly exclusive ideas into what they call a ‘reflexive habitus’ (p. 47), arguing that ‘reflexivity is mediated through the habitus as a form of class-based, embodied cultural capital’ (Threadgold and Nilan 2009: 54). and that the term ‘reflexive habitus’ gives a more comprehensive theoretical explanation for the negation of risks within society. Threadgold and Nilan point to the link between cultural capital and success in the fields of education, lifestyle and taste, and to the formation of cultural capital being ‘differently formed in accordance with the different experiences and conditions of existence of the different society classes’ (Bennett et al 1999 in Threadgold and Nilan 2009: 52). Finally, Threadgold and Nilan (2009) argue that reflexivity is a new form of cultural capital, and as such reflexivity becomes ‘habitual’.

Threadgold and Nilan’s (2009) synthesis of the ideas of Beck and Bourdieu to form the ‘reflexive habitus’ is interesting, however it is also somewhat misleading. Their use of the term ‘reflexive’ comes from the writings of late modern theorists such as Beck, Bauman and Giddens, not from Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology and they fail to account for Bourdieu’s use of the term in their article. Jane Kenway and Julie McLeod investigate the different ways the term reflexivity has been articulated, where they view Bourdieu’s reflexivity as necessary to ‘the field of sociology, and to the practice of reflexively situating and historicizing the space of one’s point of view as a scholar and a sociologist’ (2007: 527). Threadgold and Nilan do not take this into

account in their articulation of the 'reflexive habitus'. As well as this, Bourdieu's habitus cannot be 'reflexive'; it can only 'stretch' to a certain point. A 'reflexive habitus' implies that all habitus' are reflexive, yet as Threadgold and Nilan themselves argue, 'reflexivity is still heavily reliant on the socioeconomic or class position of young people' (p. 54). It is therefore more useful to talk of 'reflexive dispositions', where some young people—depending on their resources and capital—will have more ability to practice reflexivity (as conceptualised by Bauman, Beck, Giddens and Lash) than others. Reflexivity is seen as the key to being able to negotiate the inherent uncertainty of the 'risk society' (Boeck, Fleming and Kemshall 2006; Threadgold and Nilan 2009), yet the ability to practice reflexivity is explicitly linked to class and social structure and intermediaries such as cultural and educational capital.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is a useful one when trying to make sense of the risks perceived by the young people in my focus groups. With the body acting as 'a living memory pad' (Bourdieu 1990: 69), it becomes the primary conduit for habitus; it is within the body that the habitus is situated. Bourdieu's habitus is the mechanism through which passivity is creatively transformed into activity, it is our capacity to classify and recognize, and to attune ourselves to our environment (Hage 2009).

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 allowed the participants the opportunity to clarify their initial responses. The methodology employed gave access to the voices and opinions of young people who are not often heard in

research—that is the young people who were experiencing homelessness at the time of the focus groups. A great deal of interesting data was collected, which cannot be fully detailed in this paper. However, this method saw two themes—the body and technology—emerge in the different ways the homeless youth (the body) and the youth advisory group (technology) describe their negotiation of risk.

Bodies in danger: abuse and STDs

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. Their habitus was/ is in ‘danger’, their bodies in danger. In the first focus group with the homeless youth, when inquiring into 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 they... most, 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, I 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, yeh 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”. Further data was collected in a similar vein that is not able to be presented here.

Embodied risk – an oppressive logic?

The focus on embodied risks by the homeless youth is an interesting point of divergence from the Youth Advisory Group who responded very differently to the same schedule of questions. Bodies are ‘locations’ (Turner 1984: 7). It is within the body that the habitus resides; and it is here that life choices and risks can be negotiated. The homeless youth’s concern with HIV and STDs brings the body—and the sociology of the body—to the fore, with its connotations of disease and sexual desire. Bryan Turner, in his 1984 book *The Body and Society* states that ‘any sociology of the body involves a discussion of social control’ (p. 3). From a sociological determinist perspective, we could say that the cost of society is sexuality; where the role of culture is ‘to impose on the individual the collective representations of the group and to restrain passions by collective obligations and social involvements’ (Turner 1984: 21). Already on the margins of society, the homeless youth’s fear of disease can be read as a fear of greater social exclusion: ‘[t]he language of disease involves judgement as to what is desirable and undesirable’ (Turner 1984: 209). For the homeless youth, HIV is a disease which makes them

‘undesirable’, hence Keith and Nela’s respective comments “I would rather die” and “[I] would isolate if I got it”. These two statements highlight the lack of reflexivity demonstrated by the homeless youth. Their responses echo pre-modern sentiments, where ‘the profane world of disease-sin-crime was undifferentiated, precisely because health and salvation were equated’ (Turner 1984: 215).

Risk is not such an ‘oppressive’ logic that Beck claims. The two consecutive focus groups with homeless youth show that young people are to some extent aware of the everyday risks they face and that in various ways that are sometimes known/ not known to them, they seek to mediate and manage these risks. This being the case, the homeless young people use their habitus to negotiate the risks of most concern to them. Without further education—with most of the homeless youth not completing secondary education—their body is the point of convergence, of risk and themselves, and they mediate this risk in the ways they can. Staying STD free and avoiding abuse are the ways these young people negotiate risk. 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 their 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. From this we can argue that the creation and perpetuation of at-risk identities for young people such as the homeless youth in this study, does nothing to support young people to negotiate the risks that really matter to them—social inclusion, connection and belonging.

A new model of risk-making

When asked what they thought were the biggest risks in society, the members of the Youth Advisory Group reported identity, the media and new technologies. At no stage did they cite disease or bodily harm as being concerns of theirs. This distinction between the responses of the Youth Advisory Group and the homeless youth, with their focus on embodied risks, is an important one to note as it highlights the different perspectives of risk found within society—particularly amongst young people. Erika Wall and Anna Olofsson’s (2008) theoretical model of the sense-making of risk can be adapted to my data to produce a two-dimensional theoretical model of ‘risk-making’ that allows us to situate young people within their social worlds and take into account the vast differences in the concerns young people have within late modernity.

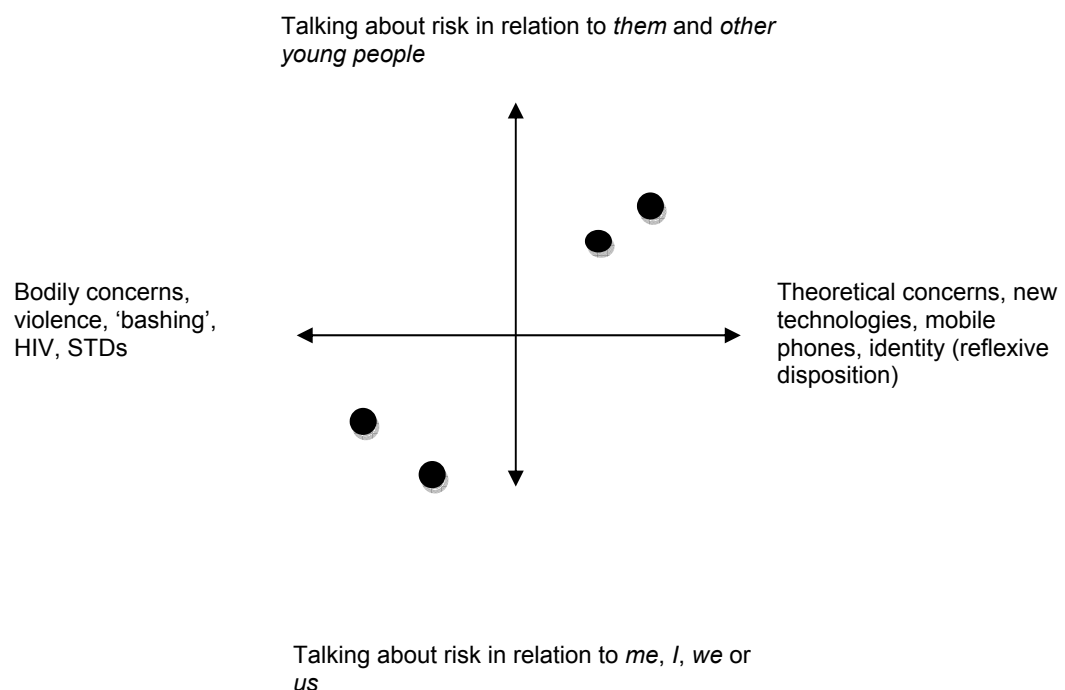


Figure 1: Two-dimensional theoretical model of risk-making

This new model (figure 1) embeds the research participants into their respective habitus and gives us a place where we can then begin to understand their position, possibilities and power within late modernity. This new model can also be read as a scale of reflexive disposition, where increased reflexivity leads to a discourse of risk that is distanced from the body of the subject. Broadly speaking, young people who are situated in the lower left quadrant of the model are those who were experiencing homelessness, while those in the upper right quadrant are the young people from the advisory group.

In this model, an individual's ability to negotiate risk depends on their ability to distance risk from themselves and their body—to overcome or negotiate the structures of society—and depends on their reflexive capacity. Increased capital (economic, social, cultural) gives young people access to a form of abstract risk, where the risk is to other young people in a virtual space. The homeless young people's focus on the risks that threaten their bodies show their struggles to reflexively distance themselves from structure. But they are trapped by the most structuring structure of all, their bodies. Unlike the youth advisory group, through a lack of access, use for and interest in technology the homeless young people deploy themselves in the world without the mediating platform of technology.

Implications and conclusions

This research has highlighted key differences in the perception of risk between young people involved in a Youth Advisory Group and young people experiencing homelessness. The young people who formed the Youth Advisory Group expressed the notion of risk in relation to their use of new technologies, such as the internet and

mobile phones, and articulated the 'risks' they see present in their world. Those young people were specifically concerned with risks to their body: violence and disease. According to Beck (2006) 'risk' is a way of being in the world, but, I argue, this 'being' is different according to a person's social class and the resources available to them. As such, Bourdieu's concept of habitus can constitute an important addition to discourses about risk and the risk society, particularly for those in marginalised groups, including homeless youth. Through a focus on habitus and the embeddedness of risk for young people we can better listen to, and respond to, the risks articulated by them and start to understand that the way young people perceive risk is dependent upon their habitus.

Theoretically, this research has only just started to explore the links between cultural capital and reflexivity and the way that young people use the resources of cultural capital to negotiate and mediate risk. Further research on the workings of cultural capital in light of theories of late modernity and the risk society would be useful in understanding the complexities of life for young people and to develop a theory beyond risk, moving beyond Beck's limits and prejudices. In attempting to synthesise the work of Beck and Bourdieu, this current project has brought to my attention a concept I have coined 'adversity capital'¹, where those young people who have experienced adversity use these experiences and understandings of the world to effectively deploy themselves in an increasingly risky and fluid society. Rather than dismiss young people's experience of adversity as only of negative consequence, the concept of adversity capital can be used to empower young people to value their own experiences and life courses as valuable and meaningful, in this way developing the reflexivity needed to negotiate and mediate risk.

Notes:

- 1 Adversity capital is different to the concept of ‘resilience’ in that it is not necessarily prevention focused, but instead is a resource that people can use to transform adverse life experiences into an asset. Similar to other forms of capital such as cultural capital and symbolic capital, adversity capital is only valuable if it is valued by others.

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