

Is it time for the sociology of health to abandon ‘risk’?

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‘Risk’ has been a fruitful seam for sociological enquiry about health and illness, generating theoretical understanding of the links between cultural analysis of modernity and the ways in which individuals makes sense of, and act in the face of, threats to their health. However, as both a topic area of research and a way of framing our understanding of how people deal with uncertainty and misfortune, it has become what could be called a ‘second order’ object of enquiry: we are no longer interested in risk per se (how it is managed, perceived, utilised) but in which domains it may be salient, or what the implications are of particular discursive evocations of ‘risk’. Drawing on empirical work in the areas of food safety and road safety, this paper identifies some limitations of locating research within the field of risk. It may be time for the sociology of health and illness to abandon an over-reliance on theoretical accounts of risk for framing empirical studies.

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Introduction

Many have noted the pervasiveness of ‘risk’ across various social domains, both as a framework for describing ‘alarms’ or problems to be faced (Burgess 2006) and as a strategy of administration (Horlick-Jones 2005a) or governance (O’Malley 2004). The explosion of scholarship examining (and of course helping to produce) this profusion has also been well-documented, from grand theories linking the ‘problem of risk’ with a theory of modern society (Luhmann 1993) to empirical studies exploring the implications of risk for living in modernity. It is undeniable that ‘risk’ has provided a rich seam for sociological mining, both as a topic area for empirical research and as a way of framing theoretical questions about contemporary societies, cultures and individuals. As an incitement to discourse, the call to ‘risk’ has been remarkably productive, generating a resurgence of multidisciplinary research, headlining generous calls for funded research, instigating new journals and reinvigorating research that deals with the relationships between global structures and how individuals interpret, negotiate and resist those structures.

Given this productivity, it may seem churlish or unimaginative to suggest that the field of ‘risk studies’ has begun to reach the limits of its usefulness. ‘Risk’ continues to be a unifying theme for collections on topics as diverse as technology (Summerton and Berner 2003), nursing practice (Godin 2006), and policy related to children

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(Thom *et al.* 2007), to take just three examples from recent years. Increasingly, however, such collections appear to utilise 'risk' as little more than a flag of convenience. From the perspective of a jobbing sociologist, interested in questions around health and illness, particularly in how people deal with misfortune and make decisions about health in contemporary society, research and theory that is self-consciously 'about risk' appears to offer progressively less that is empirically or theoretically insightful. It is perhaps timely to ask whether, if risk has not quite had its day, there might be limits to framing our research questions within 'risk studies'. In this paper, I want to note some of the disadvantages of our obsession with treating so much of social life as a question of risk management (or risk perceptions or risk cultures) and to ask how this might curtail other, potentially more fruitful and useful, lines of enquiry.

There have of course been many other calls for abandoning risk. From a utilitarian perspective, Dowie (1999, 2000) has argued that 'risk' is a barrier to 'better decision making', given the imprecision of the concept. For questions around how we 'should' improve decision making (at either the level of policy or individual choices about health), Dowie (1999) argued that we need to incorporate several bodies of knowledge that relate respectively to: modelling the potential scenarios that result from different choices; assessing the probabilities of particular outcomes associated with those scenarios; and assessing how those outcomes are valued and ways of integrating those probabilities and values into overall evaluations. 'Risk', within this normative project, adds nothing, simply because it conflates that which should be conceptually separate. Elsewhere, Dowie (2000) goes further, suggesting that a focus on risk communication is dysfunctional for democratic accountability. Only 'those who rely on fudge and confusion as instruments of political persuasion and social lubrication' (Dowie 2000, p. 69) will, he says, lose by abandoning 'risk', as the widespread use of the concept to engage the public in discussions about (for instance) 'risk communication' or 'public understanding of risk' obscures the need for better education about decision making for effective, democratic participation. From a more sociological perspective, one might argue that Dowie perhaps assumes an over-rationalist model of human decision making, hardly reflecting how decisions do get made. The sociology of health is legitimately concerned with what *is* rather than what ought to be and, given the ubiquity of risk discourse, the frameworks that are drawn upon to both make decisions and to render those decisions communicable are proper topics of enquiry. Arguing for the abandonment of risk as a useful technical concept does not imply that we need to abandon the study of risk, given that the concept (however malleable or imprecise it may be) clearly not only exists as a social referent, but exists as an unusually pervasive one.

However, the charge of imprecision and insufficient conceptual clarity has also been levelled at risk from less normative positions. Luhmann (1990, 1993) argued that much work on risk in sociology is under-theorised, lacking any reflexivity around the role of sociology in creating its own conceptual context. Luhmann (1993) instead offers a comprehensive sociology of risk, as part of a systematic analysis of modernity with 'risk' conceptualised as a form for confronting future uncertainty. His critique of sociological theorising shares with Dowie's a focus on the need to be absolutely precise about concepts, but at the level of systems of communication, with the aim of analysis being to specify the distinctions brought into being by communication around risk, and their implications (see Anderson 2003, pp. 78–79 for one summary of this). Luhmann's sociology of risk, as part of a general systems

theory of society, has been (for many readers) difficult to operationalise in terms of empirical research, and has perhaps had little impact on the English-language field, certainly compared with Beck's 'risk society' thesis (Beck 1992). Beck's analysis has provided a more usable starting point for many, although this has been criticised as over-generalised and over-theorised in its rather catastrophic assumptions about the implications of the supposedly novel contours of hazard and uncertainty in the contemporary age. Dingwall (2000), for instance, argues that a more empirically-informed consideration would undermine much of Beck's argument, suggesting that neither the nature of risk nor its distributions across social divisions are particularly new, and that he is guilty of extrapolating specific examples, rooted in local dynamics, to an over-arching theory of modernisation. Dingwall's critique is of 'grand theory' in general, and particularly pessimistic grand theory, in that it may not offer much to the grounded problems of social policy, or indeed to the more micro-level issues in the sociology of health. There may of course be limits to the thesis that the 'risk society' can characterise a new order, and perhaps less discontinuity between the pre-modern and modern worlds than Beck's rhetoric admits. However, the Risk Society thesis does identify both discourses and practices which have some credibility and resonance as ways of making sense of contemporary society. The work of empirical sociology is to test such theses, and specify both the utility and the limits. My aim here is not to offer a critique of the risk society thesis, or other macro-theories of social change, but rather to suggest some problems in the ways in which the sociology of health and illness, in particular, has taken the risk society thesis in an over-deterministic way, and at times over-extended an object of enquiry (such as risk discourses, or risk communications) into a conceptual model.

There are two levels at which this over-extension of the concept of risk has perhaps started to create limits. First, at an empirical level, we need to consider whether risk is still a useful way of organising our investigations of what people say or do in key domains around uncertainty, misfortune or identity. In terms of simply describing social behaviour and accounts of that behaviour, does a 'risk' framework facilitate or constrain our ability to produce valid representations of the world as understood by those in it? This is perhaps a question about the value of risk in studies located in the more interpretative qualitative traditions. It is also a question relating to social policy implications, given that much social research on risk has been tied to policy projects of understanding public views in order to improve communications. To be useful for such projects (or at least not exacerbate the perceived problems in policy communication) qualitative research should aim for some kind of representational adequacy, in generating accounts of public understanding that are more than mere artefacts of the research process.

Second, at a more analytical level, if we are concerned not with documenting emic accounts from a more or less realist perspective, but with producing a more theoretical analysis of that world, we need to ask whether the concepts associated with 'risk society' theory are still useful for thinking with; and for addressing second-order questions, such as how people come to account for the world in particular ways, or what regimes of truth legitimate particular ways of accounting and not others. Here, from a more constructivist position, the questions are similar. To what extent does a 'risk framing' pre-empt the questions we ask and the answers generated? To explore what framing enquiry about 'risk' opens up, and what it might shut down, this paper draws on some empirical work from two small studies from the sociology of health and illness, specifically on food safety and on road injury.

The former focused on what could be called lay, or public, understandings, and the second on professionals' accounts of their decision making. These two areas have been selected because they are ones which we might expect *a priori* risk discourses to be particularly salient empirically, in terms of describing how social actors make sense of the work, and for risk theorising to be conceptually useful for making sense of what is going on.

The objects of enquiry in the field of sociology of risk

First, in criticising the 'over-extension' of risk theorising, I might be accused of 'constructing a straw man' given that, in many arenas touching on questions about health, illness and misfortune, there is of course a considerable body of research and literature that does not mention risk. Even where 'risk' is a referent, researchers and writers have already perhaps moved on. One could cite Newman's work in child welfare, and its deliberate focus on 'resilience' rather than risk (Newman 2004), or Wilkinson (2000) on suffering as a neglected frame for understanding illness experiences. Even within the risk field, recent contributions include those with sophisticated reflections on the extent to which we can resolve the tension between aims of respectfully representing people's everyday accounts whilst analysing those accounts within a theoretical risk framework (Henwood *et al.* 2008). Indeed, recent reviews of the field of the sociology of risk have certainly implied, if not stated, a shift in perspective, such that 'risk' (or risk perceptions, or risk communication) is rarely a straightforward object of analysis. To take one example, Zinn, in his review of the sociology of risk, outlines three main approaches that have dominated the (English-language) sociological field (Zinn 2004, 2006). He suggests that in each, 'risk', as an object of enquiry, has shifted (Zinn 2004). First, in those studies that take as a starting point Ulrich Beck's (1992) *Risk Society* he locates within a broader body of work on reflexive modernisation, given that they take as a central assumption some notion of a paradigm shift, a periodisation in which 'we' (late moderns) are facing the supposed end of the reassuring certainty of modernity, and are engaged instead in a precarious process of constant negotiation of the self. Here, Zinn suggests that the focus of enquiry is rightly that which 'refers to uncertainty instead of risk' and more generally: 'Uncertainty, ambiguity, contingency and context-variance' (Zinn 2004, p. 8). The urgent questions are then not those that assume one global, generalised rationality of risk, but rather those that focus on how certainties or uncertainties are utilised as specific strategies. The problem, I suggest, is that it becomes difficult to make this shift in perspective while we are still bound by a framework that refers explicitly to risk. If 'risk' is the starting point, accounts of other rationalities are inevitably interpreted *against* that of risk, with an assumption of the dominance of calculable rationality as the legitimate basis for both decision-making and accounting for decision-making.

The second field described is that of cultural studies, following on from the relativist traditions of Mary Douglas (e.g. Douglas 1970, Douglas and Wildavsky 1983) which take as their subject the interplay between social organisations, knowledges and identities. In this field, one might say that the (sometimes implicit) referent of the argument is the positivist risk-perception tradition, which assumes that 'risks' are stable and knowable, and that differences between lay and expert knowledges arise from faults or inadequacies in lay perception. The culturalists instead point to the negotiated nature of risk knowledges: that they are situated

rationalities when seen in context, and individuals have agential power in shaping risk perceptions and risk-taking actions for projects such as identity formation. Again, implies Zinn, the objects of enquiry have shifted, with a focus now on questions of identity, and the cultural values assigned to particular risks by particular population groups, rather than ‘risk’ in and of itself.

The third broad approach he delineates is the work on governmentality, focusing on risk and regulation in various institutions, and addressing how the categories provided by strategies of calculability play a role in neo-liberal governance. O’Malley (2004), for instance, has addressed ‘risk’ and ‘uncertainty’ as techniques that can be utilised in the business of government. Within the broad work on governmentality one could argue that risk, as strategy of management, might more profitably be framed as ‘prudence’ and the over-riding rationality is one of prudentialism, with an aim of the research exercise being an exploration of disciplinary power, rather than the control of risk *per se*.

Of the large number of overviews of the field of risk in recent years, Zinn’s is of particular interest here because the implication, even if he does not explicitly make it, is that ‘risk’ as a topic of enquiry in these three sub-fields has mutated into a more complex and nuanced object (see Table 1). One could say it has become a second-order object of enquiry, in that sociologists are no longer interested in risk (or how it is managed, perceived, utilised) in itself, but rather in the *conditions* under which it is or isn’t managed, or the cultural fields in which perceptions are or aren’t salient, or the discursive practices in which risk is or isn’t utilised. I want to take this implication as a starting point, but also suggest that perhaps locating these kinds of enquiry within the broad field of ‘risk studies’ at all might not be as fruitful as it once was. In attempting to move on from Beck’s conception of the risk society, or Douglas on risk and culture, or risk and governmentality, we inevitably frame our research *in relation* to that. Taking these bodies of work as our starting point obliges us to provide ever more sophisticated answers to second-order questions about risk management or risk perceptions, but also prevents us re-thinking those questions. To turn first to the limitations of this at the empirical level, we need to consider how far a framing of ‘risk’ constrains our ability to understand or describe how people make sense of uncertainty in the world, and to make decisions about their health. From an empirical standpoint, does framing our observations or analysis with ‘risk’ help or hinder our understanding of ‘what is going on?’

The limited salience of risk discourses in everyday decision making

It is a methodological truism in qualitative research that we shape our empirical findings to some extent through the data collection strategies we choose to use. Accounts people give are context specific and the research setting, however

Table 1. The shifting object of enquiry in research on the sociology of risk.

| FIELD | RISK IS... | EMERGING OBJECT OF ENQUIRY |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ‘Risk Society’ | Aspect of reflexive modernisation | Uncertainty |
| Cultural studies | Negotiated, socially located | Identity/social processes |
| Governmentality | Strategy of governance | The operation of disciplinary power |

naturalistic, is a context that produces particular kinds of data. Nowhere has this been more obvious than in the risk literature. By inviting people to come and talk to us in interviews or in focus groups about how they manage risk, we inevitably generate data about how people manage risk, and we can then produce yet another paper that shows that people are busy managing risk in their everyday lives. However, if we deliberately take an extreme case, a setting in which we could assume that there are overriding incentives for talking about and with risk, what strikes most is perhaps how surprisingly *little* salience risk frameworks sometimes have for people in making sense of uncertainty in the world and making decisions.

The first example is from research we conducted in four European countries about how consumers accounted for food choices in the context of public concerns about BSE (Draper and Green 2002, Green *et al.* 2003, 2005). This study was part of a larger project led by WHO that aimed to inform public health information policy (Dora 2006). The study on consumers' accounts generated data from focus group interviews conducted in Italy, the UK, Germany and Finland which explored how people were making decisions about food safety. Fieldwork was conducted after the BSE 'crisis' in the UK, but before other countries had identified their first domestic cases of BSE. In each country, we selected groups from across four stages in the lifecycle: adolescents, young single adults, parents and elderly citizens.

In addressing a question about how consumers make choices in the face of uncertainty around food safety, we argued that food choices should be a test case for the risk society thesis (Green *et al.* 2003). Indeed Beck later suggested that 'BSE is an explosive reminder of the inability of both nation-states and transnational decision-making bodies like the EU to manage risk in a chaotically interacting world risk society' (Beck 2006, p. 10). According to the risk society thesis, food risks in general exemplify contemporary risks for a number of related reasons. First, they are hidden within the everyday and mundane, imperceptible to lay people, who are reliant on expert external agencies to standardise, monitor and approve. Yet individuals have to make their choices, from the bewildering variety on offer in high income societies, as well as between the myriad risks that contemporary food may impose. These risks relate to potential impacts on immediate health (from improper cooking, hygiene or storage) and to long-term health from insufficiently nutritional choices. There are also social risks, from inappropriate choices. A complex set of potential risks, in short, have to be set not just against benefits (such as pleasure, or optimal nutrition, or cost saving) but also necessity, as we have to eat.

One might reasonably suppose in the context of a number of breaches in routine trust towards the end of the twentieth century (in the UK, for instance, over GM foodstuffs, pesticides, BSE, food dye poisoning) that the population might be in a constant state of hyper-anxiety, faced with having to make choices for themselves (and possibly their families) through balancing costs, information about nutrition, uncertainties about risk and cultural meaning in choosing from the omnivorous range on offer in cosmopolitan societies. But, like other researchers who have set out to offer some empirical data to 'test' the thesis, what we found was that in practice, choosing food was a pretty routine endeavour. Most people, most of the time, were not in a state of reflexive uncertainty. In contrast, the most obvious way to read the data was that participants in all four countries and in all age groups were adept at routinising decisions, using what we called 'short cuts' and 'rules of thumb' (Green *et al.* 2003) for choosing pragmatically and speedily.

It is of course possible to frame these short cuts and rules of thumb as 'strategies for managing risk'. This is precisely the problem of a risk framing: it is possible to reduce almost anything to a strategy of risk. This would, though, have done a disservice at the empirical level to our data, simply because the discourse of 'risk' and safety was not, in general, one with which the groups were always comfortable. At many points in the discussions participants deliberately shifted the topic or reframed discussion when we asked explicitly about the 'risks' or safety of food choices. This was not mere semantic preference, or denial, or difficulty in conceptualising the issue, but rather appeared to be a preference for thinking about the topic of food as primarily relating to other domains of knowledge (Draper and Green 2002). For one group of mothers from the UK, for instance, the preferred discourse was 'nutrition'. Some explicitly noted that they were not interested, or not particularly knowledgeable, about 'safety' or 'risk', but that they were interested in good nutrition, which for them belonged to a different order of expertise. Again, one could frame this as about 'risk', in that it relates to balancing the long term risks to health for their families, but this would be a warping of the data, which seemed to reflect more a concern with a 'good life' and maximising doing the best for one's family. Other groups moved swiftly away from risk and safety to discussions around cost or pleasure, with participants preferring to think about food in the context of either household economy or a leisure activity. For many Italian citizens who took part in the groups, it was not risk but 'industrialisation' and 'modernisation' that concerned them. Industrialisation was a process which for them had ruined what they considered was 'good food', and which framed the accounts they gave of decisions about choosing food:

At the industrial level I think all foodstuffs are the same . . . I trust locally made bread, which unfortunately I can't get, so I have to buy industrial bread (young single adult, Bologna).

Again, one could construct this as a risk discourse (with the growth of large scale production processes interpreted as a 'risk' to what is perceived as healthy food), but it may be more convincing to interpret 'industrialisation' as a discourse primarily orientated around a concern about unwelcome social change. Social change was not related to the emergence of a risk society, but to the growth of capitalist production and the reduction in small bakeries and other artisan producers. Analytically, we could extrapolate these concerns as being 'about' the social changes brought about by modernity defined as the 'risk society', but there are no good empirical or theoretical grounds for doing this, rather than drawing on any other macro-theory of modernisation.

When pushed, most participants in our study *could* of course do 'risk talk', and could comment on experts' pronouncements about such topics as BSE, but the point is that their preferred frameworks were not those that related overtly to risk. Neither was there any evidence that the kinds of risk calculability, in which rationalist strategies of balancing the potential future implications of decisions, impinged much on everyday decision making. Choosing food was presented instead as a largely routine and rather unremarkable affair in most groups across all four countries:

Rarely do you stop and think about [the safety of] those pastries really (parent, Kuopio, Finland).

A If you like, you eat it

B You can find something unhealthy in everything you eat. You can't think about it too much (adolescents, Trento, Italy).

I think about prices, not about poisons (young single adult, Bologna, Italy).

These routine disavowals of anxiety does not mean that ideas of risk were not salient for the people we talked to and, like many other studies, this one generated considerable 'talk' about risk, particularly in terms of how it contributes to the presentation of appropriate identities. Older citizens, for instance, presented themselves as risk-hardy survivors who could eat out-of-date foodstuffs, or ignore the threat of BSE, in part because this enabled them to discursively locate other (younger, more modern) people as anxious worriers. Similarly, adolescents utilised risk talk as a strategy, in that they talked about deliberately courting health risks, such as burgers from late night fast food outlets (perceived as particularly likely to be 'dangerous' in terms of food poisoning). However, this too is a choice that is routinised: to eat a burger or a kebab that is widely associated as being 'risky' for long term and immediate health is part of the stock of discursive strategies at your disposal as a young adult for demonstrating an appropriately cavalier attitude to the 'prudentialism' of older, more careful, adults. There was no evidence that these 'choices' were made after careful calculations of the relative social and health risks entailed.

None of this is very surprising, in that it resonates with other findings from research from the cultural studies approach to risk. That is, discourses of risk are culturally located, and are resources utilised by agential social actors, rather than merely constituting sets of opinions more or less in line with expert knowledges. What is of more interest here is the broader finding: even in an arena in which we would expect the topic of risk to be fore-grounded, both because of the exemplar status of food as a case study and the methodological framing of participants 'talk', it is in fact a rather minor strand. We have to do what feels like a disservice to the empirical data in order to make them fit our theoretical concerns. More specifically it then becomes even more important to ask not 'how do these participants assess risk?' but 'when, and why, does risk become a salient way of framing talk about food?' In the data we have, there is one situation in which participants did willingly shift into what we might call a risk discourse. That is in the context of talk about cultural difference or 'others'. First were examples from the rather throw-away comments about the riskiness of food from other countries or provinces. Here are two comments from the UK participants:

you know when they have to ship things from faraway countries they have to pump them with so much rubbish to keep them fresh all the time, with tomatoes you have to pump them with fish genes to make them frost free . . .

The French and all the other countries were quick to jump on us, but they weren't so open about declaring that they had got it [BSE] and I don't think they still are, some of these countries.

There were similar examples from other countries, with of course different referents. In Germany and Italy, for instance, it was different regions, with home regions preferred as a source of food, and 'safety' being used to legitimate that choice. A participant from Kiel in Germany, for instance, made the passing, unchallenged comment that: 'I think the beef from Schleswig-Holstein is somewhat safer'.

'Risk' here appears to be an apparently neutral resource for rationalising what may be political or emotional attachments, but to characterise this discursive strategy as a rationale would be misleading. These kinds of comments were offered as short-hand summaries, generally contributed to the discussion without debate and rarely challenged. They form, perhaps, part of the stock of common-sense knowledge about 'the other' and its dangerousness, rather than any technocratic assessment of the relative risks of foodstuffs from local and other regions. Similarly, summary or routine comments that appeared to be 'about' risk were utilised as a resource for dealing with social differences within the groups. Talk about cultural difference could be quickly reframed within the discussions to what could be seen as talk 'about' risk, as a strategy for alleviating potentially divisive topics. Here a group of parents shift a discussion begun by one woman about her avoidance of pork because of her religion, a potentially contentious topic, to one about the objective 'safety' of that kind of decision:

A: We don't eat pork in any case . . . for religious reasons

B: A lot of the religious things to do with meat come from the hygiene aspect anyway, like Jewish people they won't store meat in the same fridge as dairy produce . . . a lot of that is down to hygiene

C: They are dirty, pigs

D: Absolutely, and it has been proved apparently many years ago

B: So it all comes down to hygiene (parents, UK).

Here is an example of what many commentators have noted as the acceptability of a risk and safety discourse in contemporary society, which enables us to discuss social difference in an apparently political neutral way, and to justify decisions as taken for reasons of rational calculability. This, it could be argued, is evidence of what Horlick-Jones (2005b) calls the 'specialness' of risk, in that it can provide 'a technical discourse . . . for making decisions that may be portrayed as objective' (p. 257). Similar instrumental uses of risk have certainly been found in a number of empirical settings, such as Lindsay Prior's (2001) work on how rationing decisions in genetic counselling are framed in terms of risk assessment. Data from the study of food risks suggests that this is not just the province of professionals, but that in everyday talk, 'risk' has become an apparently technocratic way of accounting for what would otherwise be politically contentious or socially divisive. However, we need to be extremely careful making these interpretations from data such as those from focus group interviews. As always, individual utterances perform a number of functions other than offering access to some underlying rationales of risk calculability, or the acceptability of those. Routine comments such as 'it all comes down to hygiene' or 'beef from our region is best' are also ways of recruiting members of the group to a commonality. They do not necessarily illustrate any risk calculation or even an appeal to this as a regime of accounting, but may be merely rhetorical tropes, utilised to keep conversation going, or to reduce the chance of awkward divisions. The danger is that working from a risk framework is that of over-interpreting such comments, without looking carefully not only at the work they do discursively, but also at what other comments, drawing on other frames, perform similar work in the discussions. Participants also made routine comments about the food from other countries and regions being less tasty, for instance, and there are other discursive resources available for moving away from talk about religious difference when that threatens to disrupt harmony.

Competing discourses in professional practice

Risk, in short, is not the only discourse that operates either to legitimate political decisions or to provide an apparently neutral resource for discussing difference. It may be that in focusing on risk assessment, which does indeed appear to have some special qualities as a rhetorical resource, we may make less visible other frameworks which also do this work, and fail to ask why, and in what circumstances, people do refer to 'risk' rather than other candidate frameworks that have emerged in modern professional settings. In technical and professional arenas, although often prioritised, risk assessment is only one of a variety of discourses utilised to both make actions accountable and apparently objective and neutral. The second empirical example comes from another domain in which we might reasonably suppose that risk assessment was particularly salient. Here I suggest that although it is perfectly possible to frame professional rationality as pivoting around risk, other framings may in practice also contribute to decision making rationales. Indeed, risk may be a relatively minor framing, at both an explanatory level (accounting for how decisions are taken) and at a discursive level (accounting for how decisions are made accountable).

The example is that of a study of road transport planners, whose job could be seen as one of balancing the risks of injury with political risks. We interviewed engineers who worked as transport planners across local authorities in London for a study looking at how transport policies could reduce injury risks, and more specifically social inequalities in injury risk (Edwards *et al.* 2006, Green and Edwards 2008). One of the interview questions we asked participants was about how they made decisions about prioritising such measures as traffic calming schemes in their localities, in the context of mandates to meet national and regional road injury reduction targets. In talking to professionals about how they managed road injury risks at the local level, many did discuss the technical methods used to assess risks, and the evidence they drew on about how to minimise those risks. Many took what we could call an explicitly empirical approach, saying their decisions about where to prioritise road safety measures were based solely on risk reduction rationales. The future risk of injury was imputed from historical data on the number and severity of collisions that had happened on particular stretches of road or junctions. The cost of implementing interventions (such as pedestrian crossings, traffic calming measures, speed cameras) is known, and the average cost of casualties of various severities is known, so it is possible to calculate, with a fair degree of consensus, the cost-effectiveness of different choices, and to prioritise accordingly. However, as public servants, these engineers also had to make accountable their decisions and actions in terms of a number of other public policy frameworks, which included those of fairness and equal opportunities, and also of community cohesion and political adeptness. In accounts we gathered, these other frameworks were not always explicitly contrasted with rational technocratic risk assessment ones, in that people rarely discussed having to 'trade-off' other considerations against those of empirical calculation. These other frameworks were, necessarily, part of the complex set of policy discourses within which most public servants have to work. Asked, for instance, how priorities were set in his area, one engineer said the process was:

... partly data-led ... apart from that, what the targets are ... what the Mayor of London wants ... it's a sort of holistic thing, isn't it? I don't think there is any one thing that leads policy, it all sort of fits in, really and truly (Traffic Engineer, Inner London).

This concept of a 'holistic' decision is rather different from that of a calculable decision. It is a recognition that decisions are rarely accountable, in practice, to a single rationality, and that one might pull together not just different 'risks' but different rationalities for making a particular decision. In the data on how engineers accounted for their decision making one could read all these rationalities offered as examples of different kinds of risk assessment, but this would again do some disservice to the data. Engineers might explicitly utilise a risk reduction strategy for deciding which junctions required action, but these other frameworks do not contribute to this decision making process in the same way: they are variously discussed as influences, or as constraints, or as (at times) over-riding considerations. Reducing these considerations to another set of risks to be managed would not reflect the rather different rationalities at work here. To illustrate three of the alternative frameworks that were apparent in these data, and may be typical of other public sector work, here are examples from three engineers in the study of what one could call 'equalities' rationale, the 'incorporating community views' rationale and the overtly political one:

Equality:

as the years go by, we will be asking ourselves ... why investments are not going adequately into deprived areas ... the [methods for doing that] will be fully detailed in the plan, in the chapter that deals with Equality (Engineer, Outer London).

Public perceptions/community views:

[now] I think it's just a bit more co-ordinated. It's not just traffic engineers [deciding] ... it's actually engaging with the public, engaging with schools, finding out exactly what they want (Engineer, Inner London).

Politics:

If Councillor X has lobbied really hard and he wants a subway in the middle of somewhere ... we put that in our bid ... so there's a political element (Engineer, Outer London).

Professionals in the public sector may have to assess risks, but they are also working in complex policy arenas in which they have to demonstrate their professionalism in a number of additional ways, even if their job directly relates to risk and safety. Accountable decisions have to be defensible in terms of a number of rationalities. In contemporary London, these include rationalities of equality, where decisions can potentially be politically challenged if it cannot be demonstrated that they were carried out with due regard to equal opportunities; and those of community cohesion and inclusiveness, which stress such values as public accountability, or public involvement in decision making. These could of course all be incorporated into the agency's risk assessment plan, and indeed may well be, in that 'breaching equality legislation' could be a risk that has been identified, and managed. The point is that traditional risk assessment (that is, in this instance, reducing the risks of road traffic injuries) could as easily be mapped onto these other frameworks. As well as doing a risk assessment, each department in each agency might also carry out an Equality Impact Assessment, which assesses the potential

differential impact of policies on different client groups. There are also policies in place to encourage public involvement in all levels of decision making, and ensuring that public views are taken into account. This could be conceptualised (and probably is) as a 'risk' to be calculated like all others, but equally, 'risk assessment' can be considered as an arena for public consultation, with the 'public involvement' calculus fore-grounded in analysis.

In practice, these engineers, like many professionals in similar fields, were juggling various policy frameworks that prioritised rather different sets of values and outcomes of their work (Green and Edwards 2008). Risk assessment was merely one of these sets, and there are no good theoretical grounds for assuming that risk should be fore-grounded in explanations of how policy is made, or how we understand local strategies of governance. To conflate all other decision making rationalities into one of 'risk assessment' assumes an over-determinacy of risk for which it is impossible to test. In Horlick-Jones (2005a, 2005b) sophisticated account of practical risk rationalities in professional arenas, he suggests that risk management rationalities are inevitably plural and contingent, in that they tap into the kinds of rationales suggested above, and also underlying concerns that might have little to do with technocratic risk accounting (such as threats to professional boundaries, or political interests). Reviewing literature on situated practice in a range of organisational settings (Horlick-Jones 2005a), he suggests limits to the 'totalising' scope of technical risk discourse. However, he goes on to suggest that the 'specialness' of risk means that it has a privileged, all-purpose place in this accounting. Risk calculability can (it is implied) 'trump' other accounting practices, or at least have a dominant political role in that it is difficult to resist without appearing 'irrational'. Here we see the limits perhaps to a risk framing, in that it is impossible to demonstrate that this 'specialness' is anything other than an artefact of our data. If we are focusing on other questions, rather than looking for risk, other rationalities can appear at the foreground. One small example is a study of how professionals made decisions about accident reduction strategies in the context of 'evidence based health care' (Green 2000). In this setting, despite the apparent dominance of a rationality of evidence based health care, which is based on a risk calculus (in that decisions are taken in the light of evidence on likely future probabilities), 'rational' evidence was not only contested from within the framework (with different actors offering different evidence for differently defined outcomes) but it also required non-rational discursive resources to be effective. To persuade policy partners of the utility of various kinds of 'evidence' often required discursive strategies that relied on emotional appeals, or charismatic champions. The personal anecdote, for instance, emerged as a powerful resource for resisting as well as supporting rational evidence, and could be seen as 'trumping' risk assessment rationales at many points. In such examples, it is difficult to see how a risk calculus can legitimately be seen as the dominant framing.

Similar limits to the assumptions of a risk framing emerge from the example of public accounts of choosing 'safe' food. It is possible to read the findings, within the literature of risk and culture, as a small contribution to our understanding of the ways in which various cultural frameworks, whether nationalised, gendered or age-related, shape perceptions of risk, interactional accounts of risk and (to the extent that we can tell from what people say in groups) how people make everyday decisions. Following Horlick-Jones (2005b) we could say non-experts also utilise informal logics of risk, in which alternative (more or less rational)

discourses have the status of ‘contingencies’. However, again, there is no convincing method for demonstrating the validity of attributing ‘risk’ this kind of analytical or ontological dominance. In terms of representing the ‘feel’ of what people say, describing the discussions as evidence of risk-accounting (however sophisticated and contingent the model of risk accounting might be) is unwarranted by the empirical data, in which ‘risk’ was constantly cross-cut with other agendas. Analytically foregrounding ‘risk’ means that these other agenda are inevitably interrogated *from* the perspective of risk, and the question we ask has been pre-determined as one of how other discourses over-lay or under-cut risk. For instance, in our analysis, we looked at other strategies for food choice such as aesthetic ones based on the look or smell of the food itself or the places where it was sold, and what were presented by participants as ‘common sense’ ideas based on learned craft skills in food assessments. These were to some extent framed by participants as counter-expert risk assessment, offered somewhat self-consciously or overly confidently:

But there is nobody at your elbow when you go shopping is there, saying buy this, buy that, I just go and if I like it I buy it, I don’t think about a radio report or a newspaper report to buy it, I just buy it if I like it (elderly citizens, UK).

A: I think you go by what you are used to

B: Yes, more than anything go by what you know (young single adults, UK).

A: I think you just use your own judgement when you go out shopping

B: Scientists – you get two opposing views from different scientists – so who do you believe?

E: ... when they were on about this mad cow disease, didn’t stop me buying beef – I just went on my own judgement (elderly citizens, UK).

It is only perhaps in the context specifically of ‘research on risk’ that these other discourses (those belonging to regimes of rationality not characterised by risk) appear in contrast to, or even as alternatives to, risk. In everyday life we have no way of knowing how they exist in relation to risk, because the very act of researching this produces these accounts specifically *in relation to* risk. The specific logics that inform aesthetic decisions or tacit craft knowledges (‘my own judgement’) then become invisible, or at least rendered analytically marginal. Yet these may be the more powerful frameworks. Situating our analyses as studies of risk means we have no way of knowing.

To refuse to enter into talk about risk would render participants’ accounts illegitimate: those invited to focus groups or interviews are obliged to attend to risk, and to respond to a risk framing that is generated by the research setting. However, this obligation does not necessarily imply any privileged place for risk discourses in everyday arena, as similar obligations may well apply to other framings for decision-making and for dealing with uncertainty. The difficulty is that in translating ‘grand theories’ of social change to questions about the micro-level of social organisation, we too easily pre-empt our findings, seeing risk because we are looking for it, and not properly accounting for the status of alternative knowledges and logics of knowing because they have been analytically reduced to mere elements of the risk society.

Discussion

Drawing on empirical examples from public accounts of choosing food, and professionals' accounts of how they prioritise road safety schemes, I have suggested some limits to locating research within the field of 'risk studies'. First, at an empirical level, the inevitable shortcoming of a risk approach is that it predetermines to an unknown extent the findings, which not surprisingly inevitably relate to the pervasiveness, salience and explanatory power of risk discourses. In the example of food choices, 'risk' was not the primary framing that participants used to either talk about food, or to account for their choices, yet inevitably (in a project funded in part to improve risk communication) it is possible to analyse the data generated as relating to risk-accounting rationalities. If the aim of empirical research is to uncover how social actors come to understand the world and act within it, risk framing can prioritise 'risk' in ways that misrepresent the most salient or determining logics of how phenomena are understood. Such misrepresentation can have real social consequences. Hobson-West (2003), in her analysis of parental resistance to the MMR vaccine, points to the dangers of this kind of over-determinism in the sociology of health. Health promotion materials that assume that parents are framing their resistance in terms of risk potentially, she suggests, amplify the social problem, if parental concerns are more properly understood as reactions to uncertainty (or rejections of the very premises on which 'risk research' has been undertaken). Social researchers will continue identifying 'lay concepts of risk' if that is how they frame their research, and indeed Hobson-West suggests that they will 'find risk' even when it is not there (2004). However, when health communications are based on findings that over-state the salience to decision making (or even the existence) of risk, they may well be inappropriate or even counter-productive.

Second, at a more theoretical level, by starting with an assumption that we are living in a risk society, in which rational risk calculability is the dominant form for both making and legitimating decisions, we inevitably only perceive other rationales in relation to that. A risk framing not only pre-empts empirical findings, but also the conceptual analysis of those findings, in which other forms of accounting are reduced to their roles as part of the risk society, as representing regimes which are interpreted in relation to risk. We leave other ways of knowing and acting under-explored. Risk calculability has emerged as an important regime of governance across a range of institutional and social arena. It is, however, not the only regime, and if we assume that 'risk' accountabilities are definitional of modernity, we relegate all alternatives as marginal, pre-modern, irrational or (at best) subsumed under risk. As researchers, we cannot perhaps abandon 'risk', given the pervasive force of risk accounting rationalities in so many social domains, and the continuing growth of risk accountability as an explicit framing in professional arena. There is an enduring need for sociologists to critique the ways in which these explicit framings have emerged and been deployed, and to identify their social effects. A good example is Warner and Gabe's (2004) work on liminality and 'otherness' in mental health social work; they unpacked the ways in which risk has focused on the dangerous other rather than the vulnerable patient, and suggested the problems this presents for community care. However, a more inductive empirical approach to professionalised as well as public domains of knowledge will allow us to put risk in its proper place, without assuming that risk calculability is the dominant strategy, or the most useful way of understanding the emergence or operation of public policy.

We need, then, to continue to take risk seriously, and to subject formal and explicit risk calculabilities to sociological scrutiny. However, for empirical research in the field of the sociology of health it is time to abandon the assumption that risk is the dominant or even a salient framework for making sense of public understanding. Second, in our more theoretical attempts to understand social, cultural or policy change, it is time to question whether the 'risk society' is necessarily the most appropriate characterisation of late modernity. Risk may have emerged as an important framing of many contemporary public policy issues, but over-extending this observation to the status of a theoretical explanation risks over-interpreting risk calculability as 'the', rather than 'a' rationality of late modernity.

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