Anthropological Perspectives on Risk
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Introduction: Risk today

In her recent book on Risk (1999) Deborah Lupton, an Australian sociologist, notes that a
survey of a Sydney newspaper reveals an exponential growth in the use of the word risk over
the 5-year period from 1992-7. A similar survey in the UK right now, I would, I suspect, find an
even higher use. Let me give you a brief rundown of some of the current risks of life in Britain
today:

a) Most recently we have had severe flooding in many parts of the country which has
devastated homes and businesses and made transport very unreliable. This is widely attributed
to climate change, global warming, as well as to increased building on flood plains, and failure to
build flood defences. Weather pundits have told us that such rains and storms will become a
more frequent feature of life in Britain and the government has accepted this to the extent of
providing £51m to build flood defences.

b) We have also had a series of fatal train crashes, four in a row. The most recent, the Hatfield
-crash, has been shown to be because of a broken rail, which it was known should have been
replaced long ago. Questions are now being asked about the drive for profits above safety in
the denationalised rail and track companies, about the lack of safety equipment in trains, and
about the lack of accountability in the highly fragmented system.

c) Paradoxically, there is concern about the high level of taxes on vehicle fuel, which resulted a
few weeks ago in blockading of petrol refineries, and the drying up of petrol pumps. The taxes
were raised supposedly to protect the environment by encouraging people to use public
transport rather than their cars, and as a way of raising taxation without increasing income tax,
but the fuel protests, initially led by hauliers and farmers arguing about their relative
competitiveness in Europe, have also become about the right of the motorist to affordable petrol.

d) In terms of food, the BSE saga is on-going, with the recent release of the report of the
committee of enquiry into the debacle of the last decade and more. Now there is apparently a 'risk' that BSE may be present in sheep, and the slaughter of the whole of the national herd is even being contemplated.

e) At the same time, anxieties over the risks posed by GMOs (genetically modified organisms) in food rumbles on. Protesters have been arrested for uprooting trial crops in fields, while consumers have refused to buy food containing GMOs or 'Frankenstein foods'.

When preparing this paper, I browsed through the library catalogue at Goldsmiths College, a medium-sized library. There were some 390 books which were concerned with risk in some form including the following:

- Sustainable economy, social policy/social care/social work, developmental risks of children, health and welfare risks, the politics of risk society, crime, social control and risk; risks of long-term unemployment; risk and the social construction of accidents; science policy and risk; risk, gambling and the national lottery; AIDS and risk; drug takers and risk; coronary heart disease and risk; business risks; high-risk technologies; risk theory and insurance.

In other words, virtually everything appears to be susceptible to some form of risk discourse. Why is this the case? Does the term remain useful at all if it is so widely used?

**Questions posed by conference organisers**

I want to begin with the questions posed by the conference organisers:

1. **Has risk become the dominant cultural idiom for expressing what humans are and should be?**

In terms of what I have just been saying, it appears irrefutable that risk is a 'dominant cultural idiom'. But whose idiom, one may ask. Is not this view ethnocentric, not to say eurocentric? Who is creating and controlling the idiom? How useful and important is the study of risk in other societies? Which are those 'other' societies? Does their 'otherness' depend on culture, or upon level of development (degree of modernization)? And what are the policy and political implications of this fixation upon risk, a question to which I return at the end?

2. **What does the increasing preoccupation with different forms of risk mean for human
experience and society?

While clearly there is not any single human experience or form of society, the question does draw attention to the place of risk in society. As I hope to show, risk can only be understood in its social context.

3. With a rapidly evolving genetic medicine and other new medical diagnostic and therapeutic technology, how is risk understood, experienced and treated by persons, families and specific groups in shifting social contexts and processes?

Here again, the question draws welcome attention to social context and social process, but it raises a further series of questions:

- Who controls this new technology? What is the role of multinational corporations and drugs companies?
- To whom is this technology available in terms of geography? An example which springs to mind is the availability in the West of drugs to counter HIV and AIDS, drugs which are completely unaffordable in sub-Saharan Africa where the rate of infection is much higher.
- Is biotechnology really the answer for those countries epidemiological transition, and where infectious diseases are most important?
- On what basis do patients trust medical experts? And what is the meaning of 'informed consent' in the context of this new technology?
- In the light of declining resources, might such hi-tech, expensive treatment increasingly be rationed in terms of e.g. age (as is alleged to happen in Britain National Health Service)?
- Finally, what are the new boundaries between nature and culture, or have they disappeared?

4. Do sociological and anthropological accounts of the cultural variations in perceptions of danger serve to challenge fundamental assumptions upon which analyses of risk have been commonly based?

It is fairly clear that ethnographic accounts, mainly from anthropology, reveal the difficulty of making universally applicable statements. They also show the importance of cultural analysis in explaining why some particular risks are perceived to be greater than others. So let me now turn very briefly to some of the authors who have written on risk
Social scientists writing on risk

For the sociologists Ulrich Beck and Tony Giddens, society is entering a new stage, that of ‘reflexive modernisation’ (Beck) or ‘late modernity’ (Giddens). Both see this phase as characterised by new kinds of risk. Furthermore, they see similar consequences arising from risk. Firstly, the certainty which previously characterised early modern societies, with their faith in progress, science and scientists, has been eroded: knowledge (including the consequences of risk) is contested. Secondly, risk society is universal, and events and developments which are far away can have immediate effects. Thirdly, the relationship between individual and society has shifted: the old social categories of modernity, such as class, have lost much of their salience, and individualisation has become of greater significance. Fourthly, the modern concept of risk colonises the future, which thereby determines the present, whereas previously, it was the past which was seen to determine the present; such a view of time is also one which has little place for history. Finally, there remains an on-going search for morality, which is sought either through individual effort, notably around the body with exercise and dietary regimes, and which some have termed ‘narcissistic’, or through social, including environmental, movements.

Both Beck and Giddens reject the blandishments of postmodernism, with its emphasis on fragmentation, arguing rather that it is not only possible to make sense of the way we live now, but also necessary to engage with new situations and to create policies which could be beneficial.

Thus to sum up:
- Certainty has been eroded (but was it ever present elsewhere?)
- Risk society is universal
- The relationship between the individual and society has shifted
- The modern concept of risk colonises the future
- There remains an on-going search for morality

However, the approach of the anthropologist Mary Douglas is somewhat different. She asks how do people decide which risks to take and which ignore? Rejecting psychology as a way of explaining people’s views on risk, and equally reject the physical sciences as constituting causation, Douglas emphasizes instead social explanations. For her, all modes of assessment are biased by the social assumptions they make, and risk perception is determined by society and culture. Thus it is only by changing social organization that risk selection and
perception can be altered.

Douglas goes on to ask how do we avoid charges of cultural relativism if we argue that risk is socially and culturally constructed? Her answer is that we must describe fully the consequences, that we must expose inconsistencies and reject the idea of knowledge as something solid and bounded, seeing it rather as constructed and therefore shifting. At the same time, we have to deal with the issues of morality and blame.

In short, then, Douglas is interested in difference, in explaining why different societies, and different groups in complex societies, view risk differently. She sees the answer to these puzzles as lying in cultural analysis, in categorising and analysing different social systems, and in terms of the varied knowledge and cognition which such systems produce. For Douglas, then, risk provides a common forensic vocabulary for a new global culture.

In his recent intellectual biography of Mary Douglas, Richard Fardon (1999) suggests that her first book on risk, Risk and Culture co-written with Aron Willavsky, was perhaps ahead of its time. He notes that what reviewers have welcomed in Douglas’s work on risk has been the supplying of a social dimension to debates which had previously been dominated either by statisticians or psychologists, and the important insight that perceptions of risk correlate with forms of organization and control of social groups (ibid, pp. 165-6).

But Douglas is not without her critics:
- Kaprow (1985) suggests that a cultural view of risk trivializes real hazards and eliminates danger
- Hacking (1982) maintains that some pollution is ‘real’
- Beidelman (1993) accuses Douglas of ‘stodgy Durkheimian conservatism’
- Even Fardon (ibid) suggests that her sociological account of risk is inevitably be caught recursively in its own arguments and further, that Douglas' view of the centre is too sanguine.

In the light of these debates, in the spring of 2000, I convened a seminar at Goldsmiths College to discuss anthropological approaches to risk. The papers have subsequently been edited into a published volume (Caplan 2003). In the next section, I give some ethnographic examples from this collection which are of particular interest to medical anthropologists.

**Some ethnographic examples**

In her article on London sex workers, Sophie Day distinguishes between 'old' risks (prostitutes
as reservoir of infection) vs new risks (AIDS). Sex-workers consider themselves to be professionals, and are anxious to be informed about the risks to themselves and their clients; the vast majority of women studied in west London used condoms with their clients, and indeed, had found it easier to negotiate condom use in recent years.

At the same time, in Britain, as elsewhere in the West, a prostitutes' rights movement has been increasingly vociferous, and its progress has been helped by the necessarily greater public openness about sexuality arising out of the AIDS pandemic; some prostitutes have even been recruited as 'safe sex' educators. One aspect of risk management is that, in its name, control can be asserted by governments or other bodies over populations. Those who place others at risk are seen to be acting in an immoral way. Thus, as Day notes, risk is 'disciplinary' in a Foucauldian sense and risk definitions may be considered hegemonic.

Yet prostitutes themselves have to weigh up many other risks in their lives. Day argues, therefore, that the analyses of Beck and Giddens omit 'the equally important sense of socially determined risks, imposed, negotiated and opposed': the risk of being rugged, beaten up, even killed.

Janet Bujra's article on HIV and AIDS in Tanzania is critical of what she sees as Beck's and Giddens' universalising tendencies, and the linking of a metanarrative of modernity with unquestioned evolutionist assumptions. She notes that some parts of the world, such as many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, have scarcely entered 'modernity', much less Giddens' 'late modernity'. Nonetheless, she does find some aspects of their work useful, particularly the extent to which a risk such as AIDS impinges upon and changes personal relations and the links made between risk and trust. Bujra notes that Giddens' notion of trust ('a leap of faith') is similar to the way in which it is used by people in Lushoto in Tanzania. For the latter, the difficulty is that the solution promulgated by health educators - the use of condoms in sexual intercourse - actually engenders distrust. While condom use in commercial and non-domestic relationships is seen as acceptable by some men, its use in marital sex is considered very problematic: the partner who suggests it could either be implying that s/he had not been faithful, or that s/he suspected the other partner. Yet at the same time, men are having for the first time to question their sense of control over women, as well as their own belief in their mastery of knowledge, while some women are beginning to recognise that sexual relations will have to change if they and their children are to survive. In this way, as Beck and Giddens have pointed out, risk equalises, and hence, as Bujra contends, 'There is potential for building on this unifying effect.'
A major question which arises from her article is the question of the applicability of theories of risk, especially those of Beck and Giddens (with their ignoring of uneven development and unquestioning evolutionary assumptions), to the countries of the South.

Alison Shaw's article is on the increased risks of giving birth to a handicapped child if the parents are consanguineous kin, which is a preferred marriage form both in Pakistan and among British Pakistanis. Shaw rejects the kind of explanation proposed by Giddens - that these people are 'traditional' rather than 'modern', noting that while Pakistani culture itself is an important factor, so too is their social environment in the UK. For this complex situation in which people find themselves - of the genetic risk of producing a handicapped child - there is no obvious way forward. Yet Pakistani families are not homogenous; their social circumstances are often different and hence responses to this perceived risk vary and may range from acceptance of such a child, even to regard it as a special blessing, to a decision to have the foetus aborted. Islam itself is not homogenous in its interpretation of the scriptures since it teaches not only that a child is a gift from God, but also that suffering should be prevented and relieved. The latter idea may be used as a rationale for a different set of decisions, including acceptance of some of the possibilities offered by medical science. Further, as Shaw points out, if new information is to be effective in changing patterns of behaviour, it needs to be assimilated into lay understandings, which are, as Douglas and Wildavsky have suggested, themselves determined by social organisation and cultural values.

In his article on people suffering from diabetes mellitus, Simon Cohn asserts that risk perception needs to be examined in conjunction with theories of causation. To an increasing degree, and especially in the case of chronic illnesses such as diabetes, science is replacing mechanistic models of the body by new discourses. Patients thus experience dissipation of cause, and feel increased uncertainty

'People are forced to ask how, if events are now presented as so complex and so potentially threatening to safety, one can do anything to prevent them.' Further, the asymmetry between the past and the future, which offered a foundation for the construction of certainty, is becoming less distinct: 'as causes are experienced as disappearing from view behind, so too the future is dissolving ahead.' Small wonder, then, that individuals feel a sense of bewilderment and also experience a loss of agency and control as well as a blurring of past and future.

My own chapter on responses to the early wave of the BSE scare among people living
in SE London and SW Wales poses the question as to whether perception of risk is determined by who you are. Is it possible to find any correlations between people's social characteristics, such as gender, age, class or ethnicity, and the decision to eat beef or give it up. The only social indicators which proved useful were age and geographical location. Older people often said that they were too old for it to matter (by the time it gets me I'll be dead'), or even relished the lower prices during the scare (one male pensioner noted that 'we lived on beef while the scare lasted'). Younger people, especially those responsible for feeding children, took a more cautious approach.

Of greater significance overall were the differences between London residents on the one hand, and residents of West Wales on the other. Far more of the former stopped eating beef, at least temporarily, while very few of the latter did so. Their explanations for their behaviour made it clear that there are different kinds of knowledge. The final part of the chapter examines advertising campaigns to 'rebuild confidence' in British beef. These made use both of pre-existing symbolic notions around beef in British culture (such as virility) and also of the idea that trust is based on knowledge, with supermarkets seeking to guarantee consumers that their suppliers were known, inspected, and therefore trustworthy. Knowledge here thus includes several dimensions, including what and how but, to be most effective, (i.e. to 'restore confidence') it needs to incorporate who and where. Supermarkets and the Meat Marketing Board spent heavily on advertising, including a plethora of leaflets and posters in every supermarket. The local butcher in the area of West Wales simply put a blackboard outside his shop which stated 'this week's beef comes from x farm', usually within a 3 mile radius of his shop. In other words, the global risks of BSE could only effectively be countered by knowledge which is localised and dependent upon social relationships of trust.

Discussion

Several points emerge from these case studies One is the role of science. In her book Naked Science (1996), Laura Nader argues that science is never autonomous, neither is it free of culture: 'rather it is full of it' (p. xiii), and both science and culture are differentiated by gender, identity, race and class. Nader argues: 'Science is not only a means of categorizing the world, but of categorizing science itself in relation to other knowledge systems that are excluded.' (p. 3). For both of these reasons, then, the politicisation of science in unavoidable. She concludes that a central issue of today is 'the primacy of a heavily dressed Science with a capital S and
the consequences of its global expansion based on power rather than greater rationality.' (p. 23).

A second issue concerns the place of morality, as Douglas has noted, since understanding risk and danger is part of a way of making sense of the world, and keeping things in their proper place. Those who are blamed for placing others at risk are thus acting in an immoral way. Just as anthropological studies of accusers and accused of witchcraft reveal a great deal about the societies in question, so too can risk be used, as Douglas suggests, 'forensically'.

A third issue which is important in regard to risk management is agency. In most of the cases discussed in Risk Revisited, people display considerable resilience in coping with risk, not least in adopting an attitude of scepticism, and in reading 'against the grain'. They weigh up the risks about which they are deluged with information against other risks present in their day to day lives which may receive much less publicity. A striking feature of the way in which people make decisions around risk is that they rarely do so as single individuals, even in western society, with its apparent individualisation and plethora of 'lifestyles'. They discuss with relatives, neighbours, friends, colleagues, and religious advisers, drawing upon their advice and personal experiences. In this respect, then, they appear closer to Douglass than Beck and Giddens, for the former recognises the social nature of decision-making in respect of risk and danger, whereas the latter stress the trend towards individualisation in late modernity.

The work of Beck and Giddens likewise suggests that the reflexivity which is a characteristic of late modernity is a way of constructing new approaches to risk, one which takes lay critical views seriously, and allows for a science which is culturally aware. Here too morality enters, as Douglas has noted, since understanding risk and danger is part of a way of making sense of the world, and keeping things in their proper place. Those who are blamed for placing others at risk are thus acting in an immoral way. Just as anthropological studies of accusers and accused of witchcraft reveal a great deal about the societies in question, so too can risk be used, as Douglas suggests, 'forensically'.

Differences between anthropological and sociological approaches to risk

Giddens has suggested that anthropology is today 'directly embroiled in the institutional reflexivity of modernity' and that for this reason 'anthropology thus becomes indistinguishable from sociology' (1994, p. 100). It should by now be clear, however, that while the respective
approaches of anthropologists such as Douglas, on the one hand, and sociologists such as Beck and Giddens, on the other, have some common features, in many essentials their work is very different, both in theoretical premises and in methodology. Douglas deals in the social and cultural, she bases her theory on ethnographic examples; Beck and Giddens' work rarely uses ethnography, and it seeks to describe universalizing tendencies, including a tendency to individualization.

There is another important difference between anthropology and sociology which, paradoxically, has been noted by a sociologist, Scott Lash, who distinguishes between the reflexivity of anthropology (citing Clifford, Rabinow, Marcus et al.), which he argues is influenced by Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, and the 'cognitive reflexivity' of Beck and Giddens, which can ultimately be traced back to cartesianism.

For Beck and Giddens it tends to involve the bracketing of the life-world to arrive at individualized, subject-object forms of social knowledge. For reflexive anthropology, it involves bracketing subject-object knowledge and situating knowers in their life-world (1994 p. 156).

The form of reflexivity espoused by Lash, and indeed by many anthropologists, is hermeneutic and also communal or communitarian. It is not, perhaps, one which would be shared completely by Douglas (although she has written on a particular version of reflexivity (1992 chap. 14). She might, however, well share Lash's view that, while it is true that in the West there has been an increasing process of individualisation and decline of existing social structures, the latter are being replaced by other kinds of cultural structures, notably those deriving from the information and communication revolution and from the realm of aesthetics, which are equally susceptible to sociological (and anthropological) analysis.

This argument seems to me to highlight the on-going differences between anthropology and sociology, which are both theoretical as well as methodological. It also goes some way to explaining why, while the authors in Risk Revisited find risk, especially as used by Beck and Giddens, a useful concept, they also see it as one which is 'incomplete'. In the chapters here, it is argued that what is required for such completion is first of all, an ethnographic method which considers risk in particular times and places and through the voices of particular informants. Such an approach needs perforce to consider the global as well as the local, but it does not assume pre-existing dichotomies such as 'tradition' and 'modernity'. It is interested in difference, including cultural difference, and is thus relativist rather than universalist. Secondly, such an
approach sees individuals in their social context, as embedded in networks of relationships which have an important bearing on their perceptions of risk. Thirdly, such an approach considers knowledge as constructed, and risk itself as a polysemic.

Finally, an analysis of risk needs to incorporate an awareness of the dimensions of power, including agency, control and resistance, topics to which I turn in the final section.

Conclusion: The Politics of Risk: Agency, control, power and resistance
In her recent book Deborah Lupton (1999b) makes use of a Foucauldian view of risk, seeing it as part of governmentality: risk-avoiding behaviour becomes a moral enterprise relating to issues of self-control, self-knowledge and self-improvement, it is a form of self-government (91). Further, as Gray points out, 'New Right policies rank long-term considerations of public health and the integrity of the environment a long way behind present risks to commercial profit.' (1998, p. 44). Lupton too, in her earlier article (1993) on the social and political functions of a public health discourse, points out that risk definitions may be considered hegemonic conceptual tools that can serve to maintain the power structures of society (1993, p. 431); this point is similarly argued by both Day and Shaw in the chapters cited earlier.

Dean (1997) has argued that people are now expected to engage in the 'new prudentialism', a neo-conservative approach which progressively removes the responsibility for risk protection from state agencies and places it in the hands of individuals or community groups:

As a result the concept of risk has become more privatised and linked ever more closely to the concept of the entrepreneurial subject, calling into question the very notion of social rights (ibid: 99)

This is presented as a practice of freedom, relief from state intervention and an opportunity for entrepreneurial subjects to make choices about the conduct of their lives. It occurs in a context where notions of selfhood privilege the self who is able to exert strong control over mind and body, is the self-interested and responsible actor found in neo-conservative discourses; the corollary of such a view is that victims are blamed:

The lack of interest in the biography of motivation of the 'at risk' individual deflects attention away from the socioeconomic underpinnings of risk, and divorces misfortune from questions of social justice. This leads back to the early modern risk strategies of coercion and punishment and the construction of new
'dangerous classes' requiring active surveillance and disciplining' (ibid: 101).

I will thus end then with a final question: to what extent have social scientists themselves created the concept of risk, and by so doing, colluded with a particular political agenda?
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