

RISK, YOUTH AND MOVING ON

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Abstract

The article reviews the risk prevention paradigm and contemporary responses to youth posing a risk and, to a lesser extent, youth at risk. The underpinning notions of prudentialism and the rational actor are critiqued and limits to this policy approach are explored. The article will review the limitations of this position and draw on recent empirical evidence on the decision making of youth to illustrate that prudentialism is often not that clear cut. A greater understanding of decision making is advocated and the implications of starting with how young people think about risk decisions are reviewed.

Key words: Youth; risk; prudentialism; responsabilisation; decision-making

Introduction

Risk is the 'world's biggest industry' (Adams 1995:3) and permeates almost every aspect of social and economic life. Within this risk infused climate (Beck 1992, 2005) the terms risk and youth have become meshed, with an almost constant demonising of youth. For Muncie this has resulted in an 'institutionalized intolerance' of youth (1999) and an over-regulation of children and young people (see for example R. Smith 2003). This 'problematization of youth' (Kelly 2000, 2001) has resulted in particular criminal justice and social policy responses that promote increased regulation and control of youth (Armstrong 2004). Youth has become the 'prism' through which the social ills of society are perceived (Brown 2005), although such distortions of youth are hardly new (Pearson 1983). Policy responses have tended towards a 'corrective mode' focusing on programmes of corrective thinking, education campaigns (e.g. FRANK on drugs, or recent campaigns on carrying knives), and re-moralisation towards more prudential risk decisions (Kemshall 2008a; Rose 1996a, b, 2000). This approach has been predicated on two key notions: that risk is predictable through a range of individualised risk factors; and that prudential risk taking underpins risk decisions. This article will briefly explore the limits of the risk factorology approach (Kemshall 2003)- an approach that has received considerable critique and review in recent years (see for example: Armstrong 2004; Case 2006, 2007; Goldson 2005; Goldson and Muncie 2006; Kemshall et al 2006; Kelly 2003; R. Smith 2006). Prudentialism and the notion of the rational actor has also been strongly linked to correctional policies on risk (Kemshall 2006). In brief, this is the assumption that people will act rationally and prudently on risk if only they are given the right information and

are encouraged to make the correct choices (for example through corrective cognitive behavioural programmes, or education campaigns such as 'Safe Sex' etc.). The approach is heavily dependent on the correct identification of risk and the targeting of those presenting the risk. However, this risk factor paradigm has increasingly attracted critique.

Risk Factorology: Are Risk Factors Enough?

The risk prevention paradigm has been increasingly influential on practice, not least through the use of risk assessment tools such as ASSET, early identification tools (Farrington 2000), and the production of evidence based research that has guided much recent policy and practice (Armstrong 2004). Borrowed from the public health arena, the approach has its roots in medicine and public health initiatives on the reduction of prevalent illnesses like heart disease through healthy eating and no smoking (Hawkins and Catalano 1992), and attempts to apply aggregated data to individuals and is concerned with the identification of risk factors for offending and their removal. Embedded in a largely positivist paradigm (see Case 2007 for a review), quantitative methods and statistical analyses are used to determine those risk factors most likely to predict crime initiation and persistence, and the reduction or manipulation of these factors is seen as key to prevention. However, prediction remains difficult and the most notable difficulty is in linking particular risk factors to predictable pathways of risk (Farrington 2000). This is due to the method and empirical difficulties in establishing causal relationships rather than mere correlations. This is exacerbated by the difficulty in attributing weight to different risk factors when causes may be multi-factorial, and how to use risk scores when such scores are not merely additive (Farrington 2000: 7). In addition to concerns about how risk factors are actually produced, the risk factor prevention paradigm has been critiqued 'as theoretically and methodologically flawed, static, limited in scope and subject to political manipulation' (Case 2007: 91). There are also concerns about how risk factors are actually connected to future behaviours and risk trajectories. A key exponent of the paradigm, Farrington has argued that the risk prevention paradigm should also be concerned with the "processes or developmental pathways that intervene between risk factors and outcomes, and to bridge the gap between risk factor research and more complex explanatory theories" (2000: 7). This may require the recognition that pathways are social processes that have multiple causes, and that such causes are not merely additive (Farrington 2000), and that subtle differences in initial conditions may over time produce large differences in outcomes (Byrne, 1998). This would help to explain why children initially risk marked similarly (e.g. by individual and family risk markers) go on to have different crime pathways, and why a proportion of children "high risk" for later delinquency do not offend (Scott and Chaudhary 2003). Pre-determined pathways have not always turned out to be that determined, and the 'rates question', that is, the extent to which a behaviour occurs in the population as a whole, and the 'conduct question' that is, why particular individuals do what they do continues to be troublesome. Risk tools often answer the rates question but struggle with the conduct one. OAYSys and ASSET for example have not always functioned well as diagnostic tools although they are supposed to (Baker 2007).

The paradigm has also been heavily critiqued for its individualising approach to risk and crime and the lack of attention to social, environmental and structural factors (see France and Homel 2007; Kemshall 2003; MacDonald 2007). More recently the role of social structure in risk decision making has been extended beyond social factors to include notions of power, opportunity, and constraint- for example social exclusion, access and use of social networks, and the range of 'social capital' available to the decision maker (Boeck, Fleming and Kemshall 2006a; Morrow 2001, 2004). This is not merely about the decision maker's capacity to make informed choices, it is about the structure of opportunity itself and the range of choices and resources genuinely available. France and Homel (2007) refer to this wide range of social processes as 'shaping influences', and make an important distinction between 'individual developmental pathways' and 'societal access routes' or 'social pathways' (2007: 9). The former concerns behaviour and choices, the latter is about the 'social, cultural and political processes and the concomitant changes in social contexts that bear...directly on the lives of children and young people' (2007: 10). 'Societal access routes' can be broadly understood as opportunities, or more explicitly as the structure and range of opportunities open to a young person, and importantly how they are perceived, negotiated, accessed by an individual, whether they can and do aspire to them, gain them and manage them (France and Homel 2007; Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe 2004; Goodnow 2007). 'Choice' is itself situated and bounded.

Conceptually, context has been described in various ways, drawing on metaphors of path, route, opportunity, trajectory, map (see Goodnow 2007 for a full review), and variously understood as a constraint on volition and action (e.g. negative contexts such as disadvantaged neighbourhoods, see Wikstrom and Loeber 2000); as a positive context affording wider choice and opportunity (such as employment networks) often characterised as a 'path' to an improved situation (Aguilera 2002); or as truncated or foreclosed routes out, for example after a criminal conviction or custody (Moffitt 1993). These differing understandings of context also influence how both choice and risk are framed. For example, those concentrating on context as constraint focus on the local level examining the role of family, peers or neighbourhood in negatively influencing choice, or the 'temptations and deterrents' present in any situation and how the individual reacts to them (see Wikstrom and Sampson 2003; Wikstrom 2004a, b). The notion of social context is limited, as is the notion of agency, with little attention to how social actors may influence or mediate their immediate milieu, or how both agency and context may be shaped by broader structural and macro factors (see France and Homel 2007; Kemshall et al 2006). As Sampson and Laub note, traditional criminological research into crime pathways has rarely focused on the notion of agency (2005a, b).

Deployment of individual agency in risk decision making has attracted much research interest, including on young people (see Evans, Rudd, Behrens, Kaluza, and Wooley 2001; Evans 2002), with attention to how risks are negotiated, how choices are mediated, and the context within which decisions are made (Rhodes 1997; see also Lupton 1999 for an overview). In this approach context is understood as the rules, practices, cultural

repertoire and routinisation of action and social interaction the social actor engages in (Goodnow 2007). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1991), Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes and Muir (2004) argue that social context has two components: social structure, and culture/habitus. Social structure is defined as external constraint on agency, and at its most obvious this can include social class, gender and social exclusion (Furlong and Cartmel 2006; MacDonald and Marsh 2001). Habitus, derived from the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1991), refers to the cultural rules and resources we draw upon to make our life choices- literally the repertoire of daily life we draw upon and which in turn guide our actions (Schultz 1976). In essence, actors are characterised as both social and volitional, seeking to make sense of their world through the available stock of knowledge and values. For some young people this available stock can be severely limited by the constraints of class, gender and power (Furlong and Cartmel 2006)- in this way agency can be limited by both social structure and habitus. As Giddens puts it: 'Self-identity is not something that is just given...but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual'. (Giddens 1991: 52). As Lupton has argued, the self-reflexive person demanded by the 'risk society':

is a socially and economically privileged person who has the cultural and material resources to engage in self-inspection. Many people...simply lack the resources and techniques to engage in the project of self-reflexivity (Lupton 1999: 114).

In essence, there are 'reflexivity winners' and 'reflexivity losers' (Lash 1994: 141).

Broader structural and political factors have also been identified as critical to the formation of a 'risk discourse' (see Armstrong 2004 for a full discussion), and that social and economic factors (for example the recent global 'credit crunch') can have significant impacts on local labour markets, and in effect collapse the structure of opportunity available for young people (France and Homel 2007). However, the 'prism of risk' has powerfully individuated such issues and the responsabilisation of youth has characterised most recent policy (Kemshall 2009). The increased 'responsibilisation' of youth has been much critiqued, not least by Kelly (2001, 2003, 2006) who has argued that the discourse of risk individualises risk and responsabilises youth and their families for its effective management. The thesis is most associated with the work of Rose, who contends that governance in neo-liberal societies is carried out at the 'molecular level' in which the active citizen is required to self-regulate towards the pre-set norms of society. Those who fail to exercise the prudential risk choice are excluded, marginalised and demonised. In this sense, risks are the product of individual decision-making and individuals are responsible for their avoidance and for the exercise of prudential choice (e.g. skill training and life-long learning) (Rose 1996a, b, 2000). In effect collective, macro, social and structural risks are reframed as individual ones, a matter of poor choice, lack of judgement, or skill deficit.

In essence, individuals are now framed as shapers of their own worlds 'making decisions according to calculations of risk and opportunity' (Petersen 1996: 47). 'Active' rather than 'passive' citizens are seen as the desirable norm, and the essence of the active citizen is the ability to self-risk manage. In effect, the formation of the prudent person, a character deeply embedded in much current criminal justice and social policy (see Kemshall 2006; 2009).

Prudentialism: But Not as We Know It

Penal and crime policies based on risk have presumed the rational actor, the person who, if given information on risk including costs and benefits, will alter their behaviour (including criminal behaviour) accordingly (see for example Cornish and Clarke 1986). The rational actor has been much critiqued in risk research (Lupton 1999), not least on the grounds that this paradigm ignores the role of emotion in decision-making (Slovic 2000); the social context within which risk decisions are actually made (Bloor 1995; Rhodes 1997); and the role of social/structural constraints on choice (Kemshall 2006). It also presumes a rather over-simplified model of risk communication, often disparagingly referred to as the 'hypodermic approach'.

The 'hypodermic approach' to risk communication has also been much critiqued, not least on the grounds that it presumes a simple 'injection' of information from giver to receiver, and that risk communication is immune from interpretation, selection, feedback, dispute, and disbelief (see Hughes, Kitlinger and Murdock 2006; Kitlinger 2004; Murdock, Petts and Horlick-Jones 2003). Knowledge of a risk does not necessarily mean we will act on it or necessarily choose what outsiders consider to be the most rational course of action. For example, Denscombe (2001) found that young smokers are not ignorant of the risks but choose to diminish, justify and ignore them because smoking was integral to their identity. Other studies of adult health risks indicate that knowledge of a risk does not necessarily change behaviours (Alaszewski 2005, 2006; see Hobson-West 2003 on MMR; Ruston and Clayton 2002 on heart disease; Thirlaway and Hegg 2005 on alcohol and cancer). Interestingly people tend to adopt strategies to manage their anxieties about risk but are less likely to change their behaviour - for example in response to alcohol campaigns people justify continued drinking by stating they 'only drink wine and not spirits', and 'only red wine because it is good for you' (Alaszewski 2006; Thirlaway and Hegg 2005; see also Kemshall 2008b pp: 79-83 for a full review).

It is also important to recognise that children and young people do not necessarily experience their lives as a source of risk, nor do they necessarily see themselves as posers of risks to others (Boeck et al 2006a). Problematic behaviours and risk taking may be framed positively and seen as both rewarding and justified (Sharland 2006), and corrective action by adult led institutions is both resisted and resented. Recent studies have shown young people as proactive risk takers (Essau 2006; Green et al 2000; Ward and Bayley 2007) capable of constructing alternative selves to those framed by policy (Yates 2006), and able to negotiate risk and adverse circumstances contrary to current risk

prevention predictions (Evans 2002; Schoon and Bynner 2003). As Wood, drawing on Ungar (2007) has put it:

Young people's behaviour that may be seen by outsiders as 'deviant' may in fact be navigation strategies that young people employ in order to ward off greater risks (Wood, J. 2008: 214).

For example, carrying knives in known violent areas for self-protection may seem to be a prudent choice for those young people concerned.

An Alternative Approach: Situated Accounts

Despite such critiques of the rational actor, much current policy and practice presumes the 'Prudential Human' who will make prudent and rational choices about risk if only the correct information is given. Within this policy approach young people are often characterised as imprudent, irrational and vulnerable because they fail to calculate risks properly or to act wisely upon risk information given by adults (Armstrong 2004; France 2000; Goldson 2001; Kemshall 2008a; Swadner and Lubeck 1995). However, young people can be prudential about risks, although not always in the ways adults might expect (Kemshall 2008a).

This alternative approach emphasizes young peoples' accounts of risk and decision making, and sees their 'risk taking behaviour as grounded within the specific social and economic context in which they live' (Mitchell et al 2001: 218; Thom, Sales and Pearce 2007; Ward and Bayley 2007). Whilst such decision making is often characterised as irrational by official and policy driven accounts of risk, close attention to young peoples' framing of risk can often show them as 'expert 'risk' managers and survivors' (Mitchell et al 2001: 218; Ward and Bayley 2007). These 'situated vocabularies' of risk (Mitchell et al 2001: 218) are potentially a rich source of data on how young people are regularly assessing and managing risk. For example Ward and Bayley from focus group research with young people found that their: 'risk behaviours are complex and bound up within peer relationships, status and identity' (2007: 52).

There is a growing body of research literature in this area, focusing on health risks (Alaszewski 2005), crime risks (Kemshall 2003), and general risks associated with 'youth' (MacDonald and Marsh 2001). Increasingly it is recognised that young people face extensive risks in their life course (Furlong and Cartmel 2006) and also engage in what many adults perceive to be a wide range of risky behaviours (Mitchell et al 2001). Whilst official discourse may characterise many of these behaviours as 'irrational' (Armstrong 2004), Denscombe (2001) found that whether something is perceived as a risk, and whether risks are taken can depend upon the priorities of the young person and the meaning they attach to the risky behaviour. Taking risks can be crucial to their self-identify (Denscombe 2001) and their perceived social benefits to the young person (e.g. membership of a group). Children and young people do not necessarily see risk the same as adults (Furlong and Cartmel 2006), although their views on this dissonance can be

sophisticated. For example in research carried out by Boeck et al (2006a), young people were well able to 'know a risk' but choose to act otherwise for reasons they were well able to rationalise and express, and they could also point to instances where adults perform in just the same way about well known risks such as alcohol consumption or smoking.

It is also increasingly recognised that young people are faced with key risks as they negotiate key transitions in their lives (Furlong and Cartmel 1997) and that government policies focusing on the 'social inclusion' of youth fail to take sufficient account of the diversity of local networks and the 'lived experience' of young people (MacDonald and Marsh 2001). Within this focus on youth and risk, policy has also redefined the subject as an 'entrepreneurial self' (Rose 1996a, b, 2000) responsible for their own risk management and the successful navigation of their life course. This places considerable responsibility onto young people to assess and manage their own risks effectively, and to navigate key life transitions (such as leaving school, entering employment) ever more reflectively and reflexively (Giddens 1991).

Limits to a Calculative Approach

A calculative attitude to risk is seen as the pre-requisite of the 'prudent citizen' (O'Malley 2004; Petersen 1996; Rose 1996a, b), able to process risk information, weigh the costs and benefits and make the most 'prudent' choice. Lash and Urry (1994) have argued that access to social resources is the key determinant in an individual's ability to be a 'reflexivity winner' or 'reflexivity loser'; that is a person capable of reflexive acquisition and processing of risk information and the exercise of well-informed strategic choices on risk and those who are not (Lash and Urry 1994:120). Previous research has shown that social status and access to material and social goods influences risk perception (Graham and Clemente 1996), and the ability to exercise well-informed strategic choices about life chances is seen as central to the adequate management of personal risks (Giddens 1991). Risk management in the risk society is increasingly about navigation, as Giddens has expressed it: 'People need protection when things go wrong, but also the material and moral capabilities to move through major periods of transition in their lives.' (Giddens 1998a:100). Getting risk right is a matter of individual calculation, and requires a high degree of reflexivity to manage successfully (Giddens 1998b: 28).

The lack of a calculative attitude has become the site of much blame (including self-blame) (Rose 1996a, b, 2000), and the inability to self-risk manage appropriately has been the focus of much corrective education and on occasion compulsory treatment (e.g. cognitive behavioural programmes for offenders) (Kemshall 2002). Young people have been a particular focus for corrective policies towards prudentialism (Goldson 1999; O'Malley 2004) although there is less work on young people's understanding of, perceptions of, and deployment of prudentialism.

In a four year ESRC² funded study of pathways into and out of crime for young people their understanding and deployment of the concept risk was extensively explored (a full explanation of the methodology and key results can be found in Boeck et al 2006a).

Within the sample accessed through education and local youth groups (and categorised within the research as a predominantly non offending group), some key factors can be discerned. The outcome of the risk is seen as crucial, particularly whether it is positive or negative, and desirable or undesirable. Comparison to the past, similar risk events or to what had happened to others was important, and whether the risky behaviour or event was deliberate or not. Young people could identify the key components of a calculative attitude: cost-benefit, outcome, desirable-undesirable, intentionality and consequences, but they also recognised that people (including themselves) did not always display a calculative attitude to risk - 'people don't think about the outcome', some risks are 'accidents and not planned at all', 'people forget about it', and some people 'don't think the outcome will happen to them, they are pushed into it'. Adults were seen as a group who should be more prudential, but who often weren't, for example by drink driving, exposing young people to risks (for example by giving school detentions that meant they had to walk home alone in the dark), or committing illegal activities in front of them (for example taking drugs). Prudentialism was also seen as contingent, dependent upon the likely outcome of the risk (how big it might be), whether it was illegal or not, and whether the behaviour was age dependent or not (e.g. smoking). This has resonance with Ward and Bayley's study which found that:

risk was broadly conceptualised by young people although it was generally associated with an unexpected outcome, or something that carried a harmful consequence (2007: 52).

Within the groups accessed via Youth Offending Teams and Youth Inclusion Projects similar factors can be found amongst respondents, but this sample is also characterised by a sense that being prudential about the future is pointless - lives are lived almost exclusively in the present:

I think it is better to just take each day as it is and see what happens.

Yes live for today and not for tomorrow.

Because if you are relying on one thing then you are going to get stressed out and you will have a shit life anyway.

It is a bit hard to aim here, I am not thinking about it anymore because when I get back to reality it really pees me off.

(From a focus group with attendees at a Youth Inclusion Project).

This attitude to the future framed approaches to risk. In essence, respondents perceived that they had little to lose (i.e. to risk) and this re-framed any calculative approach to risk decisions. Interestingly this resulted in a more 'cavalier' and reckless attitude to committing crime, but a rather risk averse attitude to leaving established peer groups and immediate locale to take up other opportunities. Incentives to change were seen as limited and unrewarding, and the potential losses attached to changing networks, activities and behaviours were seen as high. Strachan and Tallant (1997) have examined these psychological processes involved in risk decisions (drawing on an extensive literature dating back to Kahnemann and Tversky 1972). They argue that Kahnemann and Tversky's 'domains of loss' and 'domains of gain' explain why some people (e.g. offenders) can paradoxically seek risky (and often illegal) behaviours and yet remain risk averse about change. Risks are treated differently depending on how such risks are framed. This framing depends on the risk assessor's reference point, in essence, whether in a domain of gain - having things to lose (risk) and seeking to act prudentially to either protect or improve their position; and domain of loss - having little to lose (risk), imprudent activities offer both pleasure and the potential for high reward for little effort (if not apprehended), and conversely the effort associated with behaviour and network change is seen as too high.

More recent research has indicated that such framing of risk and subsequent decision-making is affected by contextual and structural factors as well as psychological processes (Douglas 1992; Lupton 1999). Lack of structural opportunities and limited social mobility can result in a fatalistic (and domain of loss) framing of risk (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983; Douglas 1992), in which those who are powerless and disenfranchised become increasingly fatalistic about the risks facing them (Thompson and Wildavsky 1982). In our study, restricted social mobility limited the opportunities and horizons of young people and exacerbated their feelings of fatalism about risk choices in their lives. Perceptions of self-efficacy were low, and as a consequence their capacity to act 'prudentially' was limited. After all, it is difficult to act prudently if one perceives one's actions to have limited impact on future outcomes. Young offenders in particular expressed a fatalistic and often hopeless outlook in life. This was evidenced by their passivity about their futures and a perception that their own actions would have limited impact on their life course, illustrated by the following interview extract:

What do you think you will doing in a year's time?

Fuck knows.

Next week?

Slopping out (Young Offender).

This can leave young people literally stuck, as illustrated by these extracts:

Well I'd rather not have the hassle. Well to me it's a bad thing I'm talking about basically, if you've got risks involved its more complicated ain't it? I'd

rather do things that are simple and easy. I don't like having to take risks, I don't like having to go out of my way to do things (Young Offender).

With some people I would say it's probably safer inside one environment and they don't want to leave that environment. If they've got all the experience necessary to stay there, they'd rather stay there pretty much forever rather than ever have to try and make it somewhere else, because it involves all the effort that they put in before to do something that they've not done before, and it's something they can't grasp, they can't calculate the risks that they'd have to put in to start somewhere else (Young Offender).

As Evans puts it:

How (young people) perceive their horizons depends on where they stand in the landscape and where their journey takes them. Where they go depends on the pathways they perceive, choose, stumble across, or clear for themselves, the terrain and the elements they encounter. Their progress depends on how well they are equipped, the help they can call on when they need it, whether they go alone or together and who their fellow travellers are (2002: 265).

Policy and Practice Implications

Life for many young people in contemporary society is both challenging and uncertain. Their individual life course is no longer mapped out with the same kind of predictability that we have experienced—particularly in the labour market, and particularly as the welfare state shrinks (Kemshall 2008a). This challenge is particularly acute for young people who are the first generation to 'grow up' in this risk society (Furlong and Cartmel 2006; France and Homel 2007; Kemshall 2008a). There is potentially a strong case for workers assisting young people to navigate the risks they are faced with, especially around key transitions in their lives, for example from school to work. This would require attention to the capacities and competences required by young people to be good risk navigators, dealing with constant change, adaptability, whether in the labour market or elsewhere, and learning to be constantly calculative about their own lives. As France and Homel put it:

What young people really value is not programmes but a supportive relationship with a non-judgemental adult who is able to help them negotiate their way through difficult circumstances (2007: 9).

For young people with key choices to make, extensive network connections and pro-social mentoring assist personal development and access to key opportunities (Aguilera 2002; see Boeck, Fleming and Kemshall 2006b for a full review of key practitioner activities).

Combating fatalism is perhaps the most important task in order to bring hope to hopelessness. In effect, assisting young people to combat passivity about their futures and helping them to believe that their actions can positively impact on their life course and shape their futures to better outcomes. This is not simply a question of refining Cognitive Behavioural Therapy programmes and educating towards 'correct thinking', but rather a question of creating alternative, positive identities, and a view of one's own self-efficacy and the types of alternative futures that can be achieved. 'Troubled youth' are more likely to achieve this through pro-social mentoring, and access to better opportunities. Literally the glimpse of a better life and a ladder stretched out towards it.

End Notes

1. This article is based on a presentation made at the Brian Williams Memorial Conference, De Montfort University, June 2008. I have chosen themes I think Brian would have recognised: youth, the social stigma and inequality of risk, reconstructing ourselves in order to move on, and transition beyond negative circumstances. I am privileged to honour him in this way.
2. This article draws on data from an ESRC Project: 'Young People, Social Capital and the Negotiation of Risk' in the ESRC network 'Pathways into and out of Crime for Young People: Risk, Resilience and Diversity'. Grant number: L330253001.

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