



Absencing/presencing risk: Rethinking proximity and the experience of living with major technological hazards

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ABSTRACT

There is now a substantial body of sociocultural research that has investigated the ways in which specific communities living in physical proximity with a variety of polluting or hazardous technological installations experience and respond to their exposure to the associated risk. Much of this research has sought to understand the apparent acceptance or acquiescence displayed by local populations towards established hazards of the kind that are typically resisted when the subject of siting proposals. However, recent theoretical contributions, produced largely outside the field of risk research, have problematised the objective distinction between proximity and distance. In this paper we explore the potential of some of these ideas for furthering our understanding of the relationship between place and the constitution of risk subjectivities. To do this we re-examine a number of existing sociocultural studies that are predicated on a localised approach and conceptualise the relationship of physically proximate sources of risk to everyday experience in terms of practices of 'presencing' and 'absencing'. We conclude with some thoughts on the methodological and substantive implications of this reworking of proximity for future research into risk subjectivities.

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1. Introduction

Risk has been identified as a defining characteristic of contemporary society, an assemblage of discourses and practices that in a variety of ways shape not only the world within which we live but also how we make sense of our experience. This raises many issues for research but the broad question that concerns us here is how people experience and deal with risk, and specifically with hazardous technological facilities and structures, as a feature of their everyday lives. A now substantial literature, focusing on a variety of hazards in particular local contexts, has attempted to answer this question, examining how individuals and groups within society make sense of and cope with risk. Related work has emerged in several disciplinary fields, ranging from cognitive psychology to social anthropology, but each beginning from very different theoretical and epistemological assumptions.¹

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¹ One influential approach to risk that differs markedly from a sociocultural analysis in its epistemological and ontological commitments is that of cognitive science based in psychology (Lupton, 1999a). Tversky and Kahneman (1974), for instance, offer an explanation of error in lay people's judgements in terms of cognitive bias arising from the use of heuristics. Other researchers have sought to identify patterns in the ways in which lay people assess and respond to risk by using psychometric measures of the perceived characteristics of hazards (for a review see Pidgeon et al., 1992; Slovic, 2000).

This paper is concerned with one specific strand of research that applies what Lupton (1999a) describes as a sociocultural perspective – one centring on the everyday social worlds and contexts through which risks are experienced and negotiated – to the study of situated technological hazards. In particular, we focus on studies relating to industrial and nuclear facilities, examples where an established body of sociocultural work exists. Influenced initially by the social anthropology of Douglas (1966), this body of work has developed to address a wide range of cultural processes or factors that influence risk perceptions and responses, all sharing the view that cultural assumptions across social groups are critical to understanding risk and, importantly, how we deal with it (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn, 2006; Lash et al., 1996; Lupton, 1999a,b; Beck, 1992; Pidgeon et al., 1992; Petts et al., 2001). Several commentators have, however, suggested that an analytical lens that sees people's experience of risk as shaped by general cultural dispositions may direct attention away from specific, often local cultures and understandings which inform risk responses (Lupton, 1999a; Wynne, 1996; Baxter and Greenlaw, 2005).

In response both to the methodological assumptions of cognitive approaches and to the social generalisations of deductive theoretical approaches such as Douglas's, as well as to the deficit model of public (mis)understanding of risk issues that has informed much official thinking, there has been a burgeoning of work on chronic and acute technological hazards as they affect, both materially and socially, specific communities (e.g. Irwin and

Wynne, 1996; Couch and Kroll-Smith, 1991; Edelstein, 2003; Freudenburg, 1997). In broad terms these studies view risk as, at least partly, a cultural construct that is rooted in everyday experience and assessed by reference to that experience (Wakefield et al., 2001). One feature of this body of research is that, as a consequence of its community focus, it situates everyday experience of such technological hazards in specific places in a way that is informed by implicit – and sometimes explicit – constructions of space. For example, Fitchen et al. (1987) explore the significance of community experience of chemical contamination for symbolic constructions of home, while Walker et al. (1998, p. 13), in their account of the perceptions of communities living with major industrial accident hazards, draw upon Agnew's (1993) model of place as being constituted of locale, locality and sense of place. Embedded in many of these accounts, then, is a relationship between the physical proximity of a hazard and the experience of risk, and it is the nature of this relationship that, in this paper, we want to interrogate and reconceptualise. One important step towards doing so is to move from thinking of risk as something that is simply *experienced* by individuals and communities in specific spatial relations with a potential hazard and to follow a more recent development in sociocultural work on risk by viewing this relationship in terms of the production and reproduction of *risk subjectivities* (Lupton, 1999a; also Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Beck, 1992). This work displays a concern with the multiple ways in which people construct risk in relation to the diverse social, institutional and spatial contexts of their everyday lives.

2. Risk, place and proximity: a reassessment

We can begin our argument from a number of empirical observations about the relationship between hazard proximity and risk perception. On the one hand, many researchers have documented the tendency for local populations to express concern about and resist the siting of potentially hazardous industry or other pollution sources in their communities (Boholm and Löfstedt, 2004; Lesbirel and Shaw, 2005), while people living further away often express less concern. This has in the past been explained in terms of a so-called NIMBY response, in which people reject facility siting for narrowly self-interested reasons. Latterly this notion has been subjected to critical scrutiny and the social, cultural and structural bases for the response taken more seriously – highlighting issues of trust, a lack of personal or collective agency and inequities in decision-making processes (e.g. Kemp, 1990; Burningham, 2000; Wol-sink, 2006). Indeed a number of sociocultural studies have highlighted the role of wider social relations of (dis)trust and powerlessness in accounting for (local) constructions of risk (Walker et al., 1998; Petts et al., 2001; Moffatt et al., 1999; Baxter and Green-law, 2005; Bickerstaff, 2004).

On the other hand, in an apparent inversion of this relationship, other research has found that populations living around established facilities often express less concern than people living further away (Baxter and Lee, 2004; Burningham and Thrush, 2004; Wakefield and Elliott, 2000). Although conflicts over siting have tended to receive more attention, this latter situation is equally important for what it can tell us about the facets of 'distance' that affect the apparent social acceptance of risk. For instance, Zonabend's study of the nuclear reprocessing plant at La Hague, France was motivated by the apparent indifference of the local community to the presence of the plant: "what struck me as remarkable and indeed as crying out for an explanation was the fact that people there refuse to believe in the reality of this colossal technological risk" (1993, p. 122). Several explanations have been offered to account for the phenomenon of localised acceptance. Many within industry point to familiarity and knowledge as a reason for accep-

tance of the presence of hazardous facilities (Walker et al., 1998, cf. Baxter and Lee, 2004).² Linked to this is an explicitly economic reading of risk which views muted local concern about industrial hazards as premised on a rational cost–benefit trade-off (see Baxter and Lee, 2004, also Dunlap et al., 1993).

A number of studies (Bickerstaff, 2004; Moffatt et al., 1999; Wakefield et al., 2001; Baxter and Lee, 2004) refer to reluctance on the part of residents to connect risks such as industrial air pollution with the local area (and sense of place), choosing instead to distance the problem geographically and socially. It has been argued that the apparent lack of concern to be found in such communities may mask anxieties that are not openly expressed for a variety of social, cultural, economic or political reasons (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Wakefield and Elliott, 2000; Wynne et al., 1993; Zonabend, 1993; Solecki, 1996; Simmons and Walker, 1999; Burningham and Thrush, 2004; Bush et al., 2001; Phillimore and Bell, 2005). Whereas a lack of expressed complaint or opposition is often construed by risk managers as acceptance of the presence of a hazardous installation or activity, such 'silence' has for example been interpreted by a number of researchers as being a socio-cultural response born of powerlessness and political-economic dependency, defending the subject's sense of ontological security and protecting them from unmanageable anxiety (Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Wynne et al., 1993; see also Giddens, 1991).

Although the accounts reviewed above often recognise the role of different spatial practices in everyday engagements with risk, these practices have not been brought to the fore in the research literature and their significance developed in a conceptually integrated way as a contribution to theorising the production of the subjectivities through which risk is experienced and lived. It is important to state here that we view risk experience as dynamic and fluctuating – a position that challenges a view of risk perceptions and concerns as relatively stable and fixed positions or categories. We seek to engage more directly with what authors such as Lash (1994) and Wynne (1996) refer to as the aesthetic, affective and hermeneutic dimensions of risk phenomena – in particular the role of unarticulated assumptions, moral values and practices in people's response to risk (Lash, 1994, 2000). Lash (2000, p. 47) refers to the indeterminate and non-institutional constitution of risk cultures (which he distinguishes from the more normative and institutional or rule-bound ordering implied by risk societies). For Lash risk cultures are defined by aesthetic rather than cognitive reflexivity – estimations and judgements based on feelings, which take place not through orderly cognitive understanding, but through disorderly practices of imagination and sensation (Lash, 2000, p. 53).

It is here that we turn to alternative metaphors and ways of thinking about space and proximity and by extension of conceptualising risk subjectivities. Work by a range of authors (including Cooper, 1993; Mol and Law, 1994; Hinchliffe, 1996; Massey, 1993; Mort and Michael, 1998; Edensor, 2005a,b; Hetherington, 1997, 2004; November, 2004) argues for a more topological reading of proximity, one that views time and space (or, rather, times and spaces) as contingent, open and as the effects of manifold possibilities of connection between the near and the far, the central metaphor for which is that of the 'fold' (Deleuze, 1993). From this perspective places can be seen as the effect of the *folding* of spaces, times, things, people and events (Hetherington, 1997, p. 197) through the arrangement and synthesis of diverse representations, artefacts, identities, language, memories, sensations and emotions (Doel, 1996; Massey, 1993). It is a set of ideas that we believe offer considerable potential for re-examining existing literature on the 'local' experience of risk and through this rethinking how we ap-

² This would seem to be consonant with social psychological research that highlights the influence of the unknown and unfamiliar characteristics of hazards on risk perception (Slovic et al., 1980).

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