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Views of risk in Sweden: Global fatalism and local control

An empirical investigation of Ulrich Beck’s theory of new risks

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Abstract

Ulrich Beck’s theory of risk society has been criticised because there is lack of empirical evidence. By comparing people with different life contexts and experiences, the aim of this study was to investigate how these people view risk, and if ‘new’ risks are perceived differently by different groups in society. Five focus-group interviews were conducted in Sweden, in 2004/05, with people in rural and urban areas, people with a foreign background and experts. The groups consisted of four people each and lasted for two hours. The results show that ‘new’ risks are not something people worry about; ‘risk’ is associated with personal experiences and life context. This indicates a traditional or at least modern way of viewing risk, and contradicts the idea of a reflexive view of risk. However, a division between the urban versus the rural-migrant groups appears: the expert-urban groups show a more global—fatalistic strategy to handle of risk, while the rural—migrant group shows a more traditional approach to risk, where control and the local context are in focus.

KEY WORDS: New risks, views of risk, risk strategies, modernity, Ulrich Beck

Introduction

Over the past decade, Ulrich Beck’s theory of risk society has received a great deal of attention, both positive and negative. Two noteworthy criticisms are, on the one hand, Beck’s focus on what he claims are new risks and their autonomous force in societal development (e.g. Elliott; 2002, Latour, 2004, Turner, 1994), and on the other hand, the lack of empirical support (e.g. Dingwall, 1999, Lupton and Tulloch, 2001, 2002, Wilkinson, 2001).¹ The question is whether we face social changes because of new risks, or if there has been a change in collective interpretations of what risk is (cf. Latour, 2003). This study will not solve this problem but by means of an empirical study of ‘new risks’ it will attempt to provide some insights into how people view and handle risks today.

One way of understanding the theory of late modernity is to emphasise the dimension of space instead of time by adopting a non-linear view of modernity. This means a conceptualisation of modernity that allows ‘multiple modernities’ (Therborn, 2003: 294); in other words, people who live traditional, modern or late modern lives co-exist within the same society. Within a particular society, this might be expressed in terms of values and behaviour among different groups; that is, some groups of people have views founded in the traditionally modern, while others have views founded in late modern society, which Beck calls risk society. By comparing people with different life contexts and experiences we aim to see how they view risk, and whether what Beck describes as new risks, are perceived and handled differently by different groups in Swedish society. Sweden is an interesting case since it has a long history of environmental concern, equality policy and a knowledgeable general public in this

¹ Further objections, other than the two mentioned here, have of course also been raised against the theory of risk society (cp. Elliott, 2002, Mythen, 2005).

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respect (Bauer & Gaskell 2002) corresponding to a situation similar to Beck's reflexive modernisation. We pose three questions. First, do people differentiate between 'traditional' and 'new' risks? Second, do different groups in society perceive new risks in different ways? Finally, are new risks handled in a reflexive way?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the next section, a brief version of Beck's theory about risk society and earlier empirical research will be presented. Before the presentation of the results, which is the main section of the paper, the applied method, focus-group interviews, is introduced. The paper ends with a discussion of the results in relation to Beck's theory, framed within a two-dimensional model describing different risk positions, based on people's views.

Risk society, or reflexive modernisation

According to Beck (1987; 1992; 1994) we live in a period of transition, where property and power relationships to a certain extent remain modern, but debates and conflicts originating in the dynamic of late modernity are already being realised (cf. Giddens, 1990; Lash, 2003). The new society is confronted by the old in what Beck, among others, calls 'reflexive modernization' (Beck, 1992, Beck et al 2003). Risks constitute the driving force of the dissolved industrial society, and therefore late modernity can be characterised as 'risk society' (Beck, 1987; 1992; 2002b; 2004). Modernity creates new kinds of global risks, unknown to earlier societies, based on achievements such as technological developments and economic growth. The entry into risk society occurs when hazards already determined and produced by the industrialised society undermine the established safety systems and existing risk calculations. Reflexivity on a general level is defined by Beck as the self-confrontation with the consequences of a way of living that cannot be addressed or overcome in the system of industrial society. This

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transition occurs unintentionally, unseen and compulsively in the course of autonomous modernisation, autonomous of the pattern of latent side-effects (Beck 1994; 1996, cp. Giddens 1990). Elliott (2002:302) argues that this notion of an automatising of the development is incompatible with concept of reflexivity. Beck (1992), however, claims that since reflexivity, in fact, is the self-confrontation of unintended consequences of human actions, to paraphrase Giddens (1990), this is not a contradiction, but rather a description of what happens when technology develops faster than the societal institutions that monitor it. Both Beck and Giddens thus argue that late modern society has 'new' risks compared with the pre-modern time, which also had its hazards, but these were derived out of an externally positioned nature: God or some other more or less divine source 'out there' (Beck, 1992; 1998; Giddens, 1990; 2002). Critics have contradicted this by questioning whether or not for example plagues that occurred in earlier centuries had the same characteristics and were just as fatal (see Seippel, 1998: 433; Turner, 1994).

Environmental problems, as well as other risks stemming from our modern society, become social problems and hence make people aware of and engaged in handling these risks (Beck, 1992, 2004). As a result of this awareness of modern risks and the uncertainty of knowledge, in combination with increased individualisation, people become reflexive and engaged in changing policies and regulations. This means that new risks have the power to change society and become *political*, i.e. the consequences in terms of death and destroyed property in combination with lack of scapegoats creates conflicts in definition, and gives power to those with the ability of averting and managing risks. New social movements will therefore emerge, which Beck describes as 'sub-politics', and he views them as important factors of change in future

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politics. There are, however, few indicators of such a development in society so far (Seippel, 1998: 427).

Individualisation, another concept of modernization theory, implies institutionalised individualism, i.e., a view that the individual alone is responsible for her/his life (Beck, 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It means disembedding traditions and social categorisations, e.g. social class and gender roles, without reembedding them in the risk society; in other words, the individual becomes the basic unit of social reproduction for the first time in history (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The individualisation process is combined with the globalization of e.g. economy, communication and risks. According to Beck (2002a), national territorial boundaries dissolve, as local communities, organisations and individuals begin to interact globally, creating a *global society* within the *local context* (Beck 1996; 2000; 2001; 2002a; 2003; 2004, cf. Giddens 2002). Individuals travel and migrate over long distances, which together with communication utilities, such as satellite television and the Internet, amplifies the heterogeneity of Western national states. It generates 'transnational people' who are attached to more than one geographical and cultural sphere. According to Beck (2004), this is also the beginning of accepting and respecting other cultures and people, based on difference rather than similarity, i.e. the 'otherness of others'. This is not to say that Beck discards risks as the driving force of change, but rather that he stresses the concepts of individualisation and globalization as two other factors of change besides risks.

Beck seems to argue that the process of individualisation and the reflexive view of risk includes all people, at least in the West. Even if there can be groups in a given society that are more reflexive than others, they are not part of different modernities. An alternative conceptualisation of modernity is proposed by Therborn (2003), who more

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clearly argues for the existence of multiple modernities. Therborn argues that different modernities are entangled, allowing both parallel modernities, based in different value systems, e.g. traditional, modern or late modern, and a mix of these modernities. One way of interpreting Therborn’s multiple modernities on a group level is to understand it as differences in life contexts, i.e. different groups in society live their lives with specific norms, life-styles and life-chances influencing their perceptions and actions. This means that people with roots in different modernities, and life contexts, meet and to some extent share e.g. experiences, values and/or perceptions. Sometimes different values can lead to the same behaviour, as when both old people in the countryside and young people in the city save energy, the former because of a life-long experience of scarce resources and the latter due to an awareness of global warming.

Empirical insights into the theory of risk society

The point of departure in this paper is the lack of empirical investigations (e.g. Dingwall, 1999; Wilkinson, 2001) and clear measurable indicators of the theory of risk society (e.g. Laraña, 2001). In his book ‘Risk society’ Beck describes his approach as ‘...some *empirically oriented, projective social theory* – without any methodological safeguards.’ (1992: 9, italics in original). ‘Empirical orientation’ means giving random examples of ‘modernization risks’, which range from pollution (contamination of air, water, soil, plants, animals and people by, for example, industry) and nuclear power (e.g. the Chernobyl accident in 1987) to gene technology (a possible future threat). However, what is more interesting in this context is the social changes Beck predicts: a development towards individualisation, globalization and an awareness and engagement among the public concerning new risks, sometimes called reflexivity. Needless to say, in this paper the focus is on the latter aspect, which might be defined as ‘changed perception and behaviour among the public regarding new risks’.

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In his later writing, Beck seems to be more interested in empirical work and is in fact proceeding with empirical investigations. Nevertheless, so far few studies have tested his ideas empirically, particularly not explicitly and exclusively.² In his critical analysis of Beck's theory, Seippel (1998: 424ff) attempts to evaluate the theory empirically by examining five aspects of risk society using secondary empirical material. Although relevant earlier studies are referred to and critical conclusions are made, the analysis lacks up-dated and customised data adapted to the particular theory in question.

However, there are exceptions: Lupton and Tulloch have for example made an extensive empirical investigation of the theory (Lupton and Tulloch, 2001; 2002; Tulloch and Lupton, 2001). Based on qualitative interviews with 74 Australians, a number of conclusions are drawn (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). In answer to a direct question, people are aware of potential risks and reflexively think of them, although not necessarily 'new risks'. People do not avoid risks; they rather accept different kinds of risks as part of everyday life. The results also show what is known from many previous studies, namely that people judge personal risk exposure differently compared with risk for people in general (cf. Frewer et al 1994; Sjöberg 2000; Park et al 2001). From this, Lupton and Tulloch (2002) suggest that it is possible to confirm Beck's thesis of reflexivity when people make personal risk judgements, but not concerning their view of risks in general. An explanation might be that the interviewees did not relate to risks categorised by Beck as new, but rather to risks associated with their local context and life situation (e.g. unemployment and health problems). Lupton and Tulloch (2002) conclude that the theory of risk society can be confirmed in so far as people are highly

² Studies limited only to a single aspect or concept, e.g. individualisation or globalisation, of Beck's theory (see e.g. Roudometof, 2005, Szerszynki and Urry, 2002) and studies where Beck's theory is applied on a particular issue, e.g. environmental policy or management (see e.g. Bulkeley, 2001, Matten, 2004, Taylor-Gooby et al 1999), are available but there are not as many studies testing the basic assumption underlying the theory of risk society.

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aware of risks, which they try to control in a rational (understood by the authors as 'reflexive') way. They do not find support for the globalization hypothesis, since the interviewees focus on local or national risks rather than global ones (cf. Lupton and Tulloch, 2001, Tulloch and Lupton, 2001).

Another Australian study shows some interesting results regarding people's awareness of new risks in relation to perceived responsibility (Gow and Leahy, 2005: 136ff). In a survey from 2003 people were asked to rate the probability of different apocalyptic scenarios. The result indicates awareness of future catastrophes among the respondents, but it also shows a very low interest in avoiding or solving these threats. People were neither interested in new regulations by the government nor personal engagement and behavioural change, but preferred a retreat into the private sphere, ignoring the risks (i.e. fatalism, cf. Jean Baudrillard's term 'fatal strategy').

Rationale of the present study

One of the reasons why Beck's theory of risk society has not been empirically investigated is probably the level of abstraction and lack of operationalisation and concretisation. To be able to investigate the theory, limitations and definitions are therefore needed. We limit our study to investigate people's reactions to new risks as an indicator of risk society, although the latter is not studied *per se*. Following Beck and Giddens we define new risks as risks arisen from our way of life in modern industrialised societies based on technological and economical progress often defined as man-made, delayed or imminent risks, e.g. acidification, global warming, nuclear power and different kinds of life style risks. Furthermore, we limit our study to the investigation of people's reflexivity about these new risks. Reflexivity can then be divided in two parts: Awareness and actions. More precise, awareness can be identified

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as public perceptions in relation to, among other things, new risks (cf. Lupton & Tulloch 2002). Reflexivity can then be measured by investigating if new risks are part of people's everyday life as perceptions and how (or if) people reflect and discuss about new risks. The behavioural aspect of reflexivity is defined as strategies, that is, how people handle new risks in everyday life. According to Beck, reflexivity means people taking active part in different sub-political movements or at least having some kind of preparation to handle new situations. To be defined as 'reflexive' we argue that people have to show both awareness and some kind of active strategy to handle new risks (e.g. Beck 1992). To verify Beck's theory of people's reactions to new risks we expect to find people being highly aware of new risks and having strategies to handle new risks in their everyday life.

Method

A qualitative design was chosen since earlier studies have shown that quantitative studies of risk perceptions might sometimes be misleading since the public's focus on risks as obtained by open association stimuli relies much more on everyday-life and pervasive risks than on for instance technological, or modern, risks (Zwick, 2005). In 2004/05, five focus groups were made with people from different segments of the Swedish public. The selection criterion for the groups was diversity. We wanted to cover a wide range of perceptions and experiences of risks by including people from both urban and rural areas, both ethnical Swedes and people with a foreign background, and laypeople as well as experts.

The use of focus groups as an empirical approach has a number of advantages. It gives a deeper understanding of a specified issue (Morgan, 1996, Wibeck, 2000), the

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conversation between the participants is open (Gaskell, 2000) and the method provides the opportunity to study the process of producing collective meaning (Wibeck, 2002).

It is recommended that the participants in a group interview should have something in common to facilitate intimacy and openness in discussions (Wibeck, 2000). The rule of thumb is that the group should be composed of people with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, while interests and opinions may vary. The main criteria in selecting *groups* were diverse experiences and views of risk (i.e. different risk positions and experiences), while similarity in socioeconomic status was desired in the selection of *people* to each group. The latter was not always possible because of the types of groups studied.

The first group, labelled 'experts', consisted of three men and one woman aged between 45 and 55, working with risk management in official authorities such as municipalities and county councils. The second group, labelled 'migrants'³ was composed of two women and two men with foreign backgrounds, i.e. immigrants with their origin in the Middle East, specifically Iran, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey, aged between 20 and 40. The third interview was made with people living in rural areas, i.e. villages with less than 50 inhabitants in the county of Jämtland, Sweden. The group was composed of two women and two men, aged between 25 and 55. This group is labelled 'rural'. The last two groups, labelled 'urban', were people living in an urban area, Greater Stockholm, aged between 25 and 45: one group with women and one with men.⁴ Each group consisted of four people, except for the group of urban men that consisted of three people, and the sessions lasted between two and three hours. Two researchers participated during the interviews, one leading the interview and one taking

³ The group of people with a foreign background is labelled migrants, since they have multiple national experiences that are brought together in a single person's biography (cp. Roudometof, 2005).

⁴ The urban group was supposed to be mixed just as the rest of the groups, but only women were accessible on the first occasion; a second focus group with men was therefore conducted.

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notes and following up issues that the interviewer might have missed. To recruit participants we used a combination of methods. The group of experts was chosen from local authorities through official lists and documents, and then contacted directly by one of the researchers. The migrant group was recruited through a language school for foreigners, and the rural and urban groups by contact persons (cf. Wibeck, 2000).

Each interview began with the question “What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘risk?’”, after which discussion among the participants was encouraged. After the initial open discussions, the interview continued with questions about particular risks, and stimuli material⁵ was used to inspire the dialogue. The participants were asked to rank a number of different risks according to how threatening they were to them personally and to people in general.⁶ Earlier research shows that people make a distinction between their own and others’ exposure to risk (e.g. Frewer et al 1994, Lupton and Tulloch, 2002, Sjöberg, 2000). The main reason for showing the cards with different risks was, however, to reach a deeper understanding of how the participants make sense of different kinds of risks, e.g. man-made compared with natural catastrophes. We found it particularly important to introduce different kinds of risk, and not only rely on what the people in the group associate as risky.

A focus group is usually analysed as any other kind of interview (Wibeck, 2000), and we used a qualitative content analysis approach. This means that the analysis was open; the interviews were first read and coded individually, after which themes and trends were identified. When a number of themes were found, the interviews were

⁵ Stimuli material is often used in focus group interviews to initiate and encourage discussions in the group, firstly because focus groups often consist of people who do not know each other beforehand, and secondly because it narrow the discussions down to a more specific issue (Gaskell, 2000). The latter is particularly important, considering that one of the problems of focus groups is to monitor the group and make sure they are keeping to the topic of the interview.

⁶ Both what can be defined as traditional and new risks in accordance with Beck’s terminology were shown to the participants. The traditional risks shown on cards during the interview were natural disasters, conflicts and everyday life risks and examples of risks shown on the cards were e.g. war, floods and fires. The modern risks were delayed risks, imminent risks, risk as excitement and lifestyle risks, and examples shown on the cards were e.g. acidification, nuclear power, rock climbing and smoking.

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reanalysed to see how different concepts were related to one another, what kinds of arguments were used and how the characteristics of the themes differed between groups. An in-depth analysis of a small number of groups may lead to subjective interpretations and bias. To deal with this problem, quotations from the articles are used to illustrate the results.

Given the relatively small number of focus groups⁷ and their diverse character, we make no claims of generalisability to the general public, and this was not our purpose. On the contrary, our aim was to investigate whether it is possible to find different risk concepts between people in diverse societal settings.

Results

'What comes to mind when you hear the word 'risk'?' The open question inspired people to mention a number of different risks, after which some themes developed in the groups. All groups mention risks associated with traffic and financial situations, although more as examples of risks rather than something they worry about, with one exception. In the urban groups both financial and traffic risks are seen as some of the most important risks, the latter in the context of e.g. biking in the city with heavy traffic, and the former associated with personal security. The women also mention individual responsibility for life chances, while men mention gambling. The immigrant group also stresses financial risks or rather the importance of financial security in terms of employment, and risks associated with differences between the home and the host country, that is, democracy and equality. However, they most of all talk about risk in relation to future generations: new lifestyles that their children might adopt in Sweden, like drinking alcohol, using drugs and 'Swedish' values, and environmental pollution.

⁷ There are no rules about a minimum number of groups, although it is unusual to have fewer than three, since it then becomes hard to make appropriate analyses (cp Morgan, 1988).

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One of the men says: *‘It’s important to think of the future. Our children, children, children, children. Several hundred years. Where are they going to live? How are they going to live? Are we going to completely ruin the environment? We have to think not only about the time we live in right now, we have to think of the others that come after us.’* The importance of financial security, democracy and equality between people, is also discussed – things often lacking in their home countries.

Turning to the group of people living in rural areas, traffic and financial risks reappear, but are in no way the dominant theme. Here we find a discussion focused on threats to their way of life, e.g. people from outside the village coming to vandalise and steal at the farm, accidents when working on the farm with dangerous machines, and not being able to manage the farm due to old age or illness. The threat from outside is described by a man in his mid-thirties working with different kinds of vehicles as follows:

IP4: And then there’s a risk that someone from outside will come and steal from you or beat you to death or... (male)

...

IP2: No, but in the past, then you never thought of locking the doors before going to bed and stuff, but now you do. You’re very careful not to leave the keys in the car. Although you live... (female)

IP1: ...as you do, yes... (female)

IP2: ...off the beaten track (female)

As we can see, all these four groups focus on risks that are related to their everyday life or personal experiences (cf. Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). However, the last group differs slightly from this pattern.

The last interview was conducted with people working with risk and security matters at public authorities, and initially their discussion focused on risk as part of their profession rather than their private experience. Interestingly, however, almost in the same breath as they mention risks in terms of probabilities they also define risk as abstract and too far-reaching to be able to grasp. The group discussed risks such as flooding, theft, fires, and traffic risks, but after a while focused on new risks based on

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technological developments, e.g. threats against electricity systems and IT-based crime.

The longer the discussion about risk continues the more they focus on how the world is changing in a rapid, threatening way, devaluating moral standards and values, rather than on risk *per se*.

With the exception of the last group, risks are associated with people's life experiences and local context, which means that traffic accidents are far more worrying than global warming or floods, even if risks of the latter kind are also mentioned by the participants. Since people's experiences vary, their risk definition varies as well, but the general pattern is that risk perceptions are based on everyday life.

Traditional risks — new risks

The groups were encouraged to discuss different kinds of risk: 'traditional' risks such as natural catastrophes, fires, breaking a leg etc. and 'new' risks such as nuclear accidents, BSE and risks associated with people's lifestyles. The interviewees showed a general awareness of both imminent and delayed risks, although traditional and particularly everyday risks like fires and car accidents are perceived by all groups to be the greatest risks, since they are the most common. The group of urban women puts it like this:

- IP2: Of course, in some kind of way it feels as if some time during your lifetime they [the accidents] will happen.
IP3: Yes.
IP2: There'll be a fire somewhere in... There'll be, I'll be in a car accident, it needn't necessarily be a serious one but...at least I've no doubt that it'll happen.
IP4: Maybe the consequences of a natural disaster are worse, but there's a bigger chance that something like this...
IP2: yes
IP4: ...happens to you.

This is also the kind of risk that exists in people's minds; but they do not think about new risks unless such a risk is mentioned in the mass media or in relation to events influencing people's everyday lives, e.g. unusual weather interpreted as being due to climate change. However, there is one exception: all the groups mention stress as a risk

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that they both think of and perceive as a problem for themselves and people in wealthy countries, a new kind of risk (cf Beck, 1992). Interestingly, stress is the only kind of new risk that all participants can identify with. However, stress is something of a 'topic of the day' in the mass media, which might influence people to associate in these terms.

When encouraging the groups to discuss new risks we found similarities between the groups' risk perceptions but differences concerning coping strategies and perspectives. Although they were quite convinced that new risks were not the main problem for them, the groups discussed in terms of a changing society, where technological developments, research and industry (or 'the market') play central roles in creating new risks. However, there was a common understanding that these kinds of new risks are reported too often to be taken seriously, and that scientists are more interested in research than the good of people. The group of urban women expressed it as follows in a discussion about GM food: *'I can get quite irritated as to why... It feels a bit like they just keep on doing research in one direction without checking if there is any demand for blueberries that are as big as strawberries.'* The participants in the group point out that they are not afraid of GM food or BSE; they rather feel discomfort and disgust. People living in rural areas also talk about food scares, since every year they are reminded of the consequences of the radioactive contamination after Chernobyl on berries and reindeer. One of the men says: *'Each year when it's time to pick the rhubarb I think of Chernobyl because then... because you weren't supposed to eat rhubarb directly after. But you eat it anyway.'* Once again, we find that the respondents do not express fear, or serious concern about new risks; rather they show awareness and sometimes even acceptance.

What we find is that all groups are aware of new risks but at the same time, no engagement in this kind of problem is shown. This confirms Lupton and Tulloch's

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(2001, 2002) results that risks associated with everyday life, intimacy and family are more central for people than new risks. One reason might be that Sweden and the place of residence is perceived as safe. Another reason might be that the participants did not perceive new risks as a direct threat to their person, but rather for people in general and, more particularly, people in developing countries.

New risks and 'others'

People perceive risks for 'me' differently compared with risks for 'them', not only when they are asked by the interviewer, but also spontaneously. The interviewee's everyday life is described as relatively safe, while 'others' are exposed to new risks in far more serious ways. Experience of migration, however, sometimes makes the definition of 'others' vague. The members of the migrant group differ just as the other groups between the safety 'here' and the risk 'out there', but sometimes 'here' can be geographically distant because of previous experiences and relatives still living in foreign countries (cf. Beck, 2004, Glick-Schiller et al 1992, Szerszynski and Urry, 2002).

There are, however, some general tendencies in the view of others. It is possible to differentiate between the *perpetrators* and the *victims*. The perpetrators are those who are ignorant and expose themselves, or others, to various kinds of risks against their better judgment, or for financial gain. The victims are inhabitants of the third world, powerless victims unable to protect themselves against risks produced in the rich part of the world. The most frequent theme in the discussions of others is victims 'far away'.

The urban group of women discusses delayed risks as a matter primarily for 'them':

IP2: Mmm, though... I think that, that there is a risk in, in their diet, I mean they, they, there are factories that spew out emissions into their drinking water, which means that they're not able to, like this happening in India. There was this nice little company involved. Or the soft drink producers in general in India, that they, they added something toxic. The water they used contained poison, so all the soft drinks were basically poison. So they had to withdraw, I don't know how much, but they'd sold it for many years without them... They knew about it, but they weren't allowed to do anything because it cost money. Well, in that sense there could be a risk, because they might not be affected until after a while, but they could get sick.

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IP3: I know, but... I think there’s so much more that can happen. But I thought of how people think, and I believe that they might not, they don’t walk around thinking: ‘if I drink this soda I might get sick’. They have more serious problems with food and water and nourishment...

This quotation also addresses the perpetrators, the company that exposes people to risks for financial gain. This category also includes people in other Western countries, often exemplified by uninformed Americans causing environmental problems.

What we find here is quite stereotyped pictures of ‘others’, never described in individual cases but always as a group, as ‘they’, the opposite of how the interviewees describe themselves. There is an awareness of the consequences of actions in one part of the world affecting people in another part, but interestingly the participants do not seem to reflect on the possibility of being affected themselves, at least not in any significant way. Although this might be seen as evidence for a more cosmopolitan world (Beck, 1998, 2003), the discussions cannot be characterised as particularly reflexive (cf. Luton and Tulloch, 2002). Now let us take a closer look at how the different groups try to handle new risks.

Strategies to handle new risks: Control-fatalism

The strategies for coping with new kinds of risks can be understood along a single dimension ranging from ‘control’ to ‘fatalism’. In the interviews we found that one way of handling new risk refers to how the groups define their possibility of influence the impact of these kinds of risks. Some talk in terms of taking control of over the risk, often in their everyday life to prevent new risk to influence them and future generations. Others do not talk in terms of being able to control possible outcomes of new risks being too dependent on other people’s actions and structures, but rather express hopelessness and fatalism. The way the groups discuss new risks varies along this dimension, but in the following section the two ‘ideal type’ ends of the dimension,

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control and fatalism, are stressed. Control can be exemplified by how rural people grow their own vegetables, hunt elks and thus feel less dependent on commercial production of food and other everyday products they perceive as risky. The following conversation illustrates this:

- IP4: But I think we have an advantage here: picking berries, hunting, sometimes slaughtering our own livestock. (male)
IP1: We’re kind of spared. (female)
IP4: And the air is better here compared with a town. And you... well compared with people in general I think we’re better off. (male)
IP1: Yes, we know what we’re eating. (female)
IP2: Mmm (female)
IP1: You’ve got a little more control. (female)

The participants are particularly engaged in food and food production, and show both great awareness and knowledge about how to avoid additives in food and water. Their feeling of being close to nature, living a life not characterised by the stress of the city, creates a notion of control over the situation and maybe even over one’s own life. This might also be the reason why threats against their lifestyle are perceived as so intimidating. New risks are, however, not among these threats. A similar way of controlling the situation rather than accepting it is found in the migrant group. Earlier we quoted their discussion about the importance of protecting their children and particularly preserving the values and habits of their cultural heritage for their children. In both cases, the aim is to protect private life against a threatening social change.

A more fatalistic attitude is found in the group of urban women. According to them repeated warnings of all kinds of risks make people stop listening, comparable to ‘crying wolf’. A similar view is expressed by the experts, pondering about the possibility that things are much worse than the general public know, that we are losing control because of the Internet etc., and there is no way of stopping this development. The group of women expresses this feeling as follows:

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IP1: I feel like you get like totally immune. This summer it’s been well, ‘your breakfast cereals are *this* dangerous’ and ‘eating crisps is *this* dangerous’ and ‘you get cancer from...’ well... They’re threats that you don’t...
IP3: I don’t take them seriously. I don’t read very carefully if my breakfast cereals are a bit dangerous.
IP1: No.
IP3: You eat your Corn Flakes and...
IP1: I have a problem taking this seriously, really.
IP2: Me too.

They argue that a possible strategy to avoid exposure to a serious risk, apart from ignoring it, is to move away to a new safer place, i.e. dealing with the risk by individually avoiding it. This is not to say that they are not aware of e.g. environmental problems, just that they are neither particularly engaged in issues of this kind nor fixed in a particular geographical place. It can also be seen as an individualised strategy for dealing with the problem. The experts have quite a disillusioned view of the development, perceiving it as a slippery slope where things are getting worse and people are ‘*in blissful ignorance*’ as one of the participants expressed it.

The conclusion to be drawn is that there are different strategies for dealing with a situation where there might be delayed or imminent risks. Either you to a higher extent try to control the situation or you develop a more fatalistic attitude (cf. Gow and Leahy, 2005). People in rural areas and with foreign backgrounds try to control their life and protect it against what they perceive as threatening, while experts and people in cities have a more fatalistic attitude. What we did not find is a more active strategy directed towards the issue in question: new risks. None of the groups or individual participants expressed that they actively worked to change society in terms of decreasing or stopping possible new risks, e.g. by being part of an environmental organisation. However, those in the expert group, who by their profession are more actively engaged in risk management, stress the importance of education and information to make people aware, comparable to Beck’s (1992) own argument about the need for a knowledgeable general public.

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Contextualised strategies: Local-global

The analysis of the interviews shows that the groups talk about risk from different geographical perspectives and have different strategies to contextualising risk. This can also be described as a one-dimensional continuum where the two 'ideal type' ends are 'local' and 'global'. As might be expected, the rural group has a more local perspective of risk. When referring to risks, the consequences are understood in the local context, as in the example of avoiding eating rhubarb or reindeer meat after the Chernobyl accident. Even though the participants in this group had experiences from other countries, they all relate risk primarily to their local setting. Regardless of the kind of risk that was discussed, it was exemplified by experiences from their life in the village. Even war was compared, in a humorous way, to a conflict between neighbours in a nearby village.

In the urban groups on the other hand, the perspective is more global. Except for everyday life risks, these groups did not refer to the local context to the same extent, but depending on the risk discussed, they shifted perspective. This is more a lack of local attachment than cosmopolitanism, even if they use global rather than international references. As mentioned before, they saw moving away from a polluted area to some other part of the world as a way of handling new risks. This is not only an example of how to cope with new risks but also of this group's flexibility with regard to geographical places. One of the men puts it like this: *'Even if you live where you really want to live, my first thought is to move on.'* Compared with the other groups, this group is most concerned about global threats like global warming, and their worry is also relatively more directed to the world as a whole, rather than to them personally or to the place where they live.

The last two groups both have a middle position, but for different reasons. The migrant group speaks and relates risks not only to Sweden but also to their home

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countries and their region of origin, i.e. the Middle East. In this way, they have an international perspective and they tend to compare their current place of living with where they lived before. However, they are not as locally detached as the urban groups, since place still plays a significant role in their discussions of risk. Similarly, the group of experts tends to compare Sweden with other countries, even though their focus is more on Western countries. However, in comparison with the migrant group the experts make their comparisons with a different aim; they see the Swedish way of handling risks as a good example, while many other countries, and their inhabitants, are perceived as ignorant or less prepared for catastrophes and crises. One of the men says: *'The English pollute a lot, as the Germans used to do, Poles... But the English still don't seem to do much to keep the air clean.'* This group often refers to 'the world system' and the fact that Sweden is not an isolated place when it comes to risks; on the contrary, the Swedish situation is dependent on the rest of the world. This perspective is understandable considering that they work as risk managers, and the result should be understood in the light of their profession.

To sum up, we find that the city groups are more globally oriented, while the rural group is more locally rooted. The immigrant group also has a local point of departure, although local can mean their home country just as well as Sweden.

Discussion – Two dimensions of people's risk perceptions

People do not associate risk with man-made, delayed, imminent or 'new' risks, but with risks of everyday life. The everyday reality looks different for different individuals and groups in society, and therefore different types of risks are seen as central. It is when the individual is affected that risks engage her/him; a risk for others is a misfortune, but not enough to initiate engagement on the individual level. Perceiving risks differently for

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'me' compared with 'others' is nevertheless not the same as individualised risk. The former is rather a matter of 'we' compared with 'them', which has been explored in detail by social psychologists, whereas individualisation is something different, e.g. a view that it is the individual alone who is responsible for her/his life (Beck, 1992, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Hence, worrying about personal risks does not *per se* mean reflexivity, as Lupton and Tulloch (2002) suggest in their study. In the urban groups, however, we find a tendency towards individualised risk perception in that they tend to find individual solutions and they are also willing to take risks for personal gain.

The results also show that all the participants are aware of new risks which, according to Beck (1992, 2002a, Beck et al 2003), should lead to a critical public engaged in sub-political movements, at least aggregated on the societal level. The problem is, however, that even though there is an awareness of new risks, this is not what people in general worry about. The awareness comes from single events, scares from scientists through the mass media, but initiates no active behaviour in the groups of people we have studied. Thus, awareness alone does not mean that there is a deeper insight, engagement, or a basis for development of new social movements (cf. Gow and Leahy, 2005). The awareness might be created by the mass media and may therefore be superficial. In other words, there is no evidence of any new risk that mobilises people's attention enough to lead to the kind of social movements Beck suggests. On the contrary, new risks are rather associated with hopelessness and being despondent.

From our empirical material we have constructed a theoretical model with a two-dimensional space of risk strategies with the dimensions 'control-fatalism' and 'local-global' (see Figure 1). Lupton and Tulloch (2002) also found that people tend to try to control their situation, though they included all kinds of risks and hence saw this as an indication of individualisation. We interpret the need for control in a slightly different

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way, i.e. in terms of preserving things as they are. An important difference compared with the earlier study is that we focus on risks that Beck describes as new, and not on risk in general. Fatalism is not a theme in the studies of Lupton and Tullochs, but it is in Gow and Leahy's (2005) survey. A fatalistic attitude of handling new risks is more apparent in the urban group along with the experts. They saw few ways in which they could deal with most of these risks, and instead they ignored them or treated them as inevitable. The rural group and the migrant group, on the other hand, both expressed a need for personal control. They primarily talked about controlling risks in terms of growing your own food instead of buying hazardous food or protecting traditional values in a changing society.

The second dimension ranges from a local to a more global focus, in terms of contextualising new risks. Urban people emphasised a global perspective by talking about 'the world' and repeating the possibility of moving if things get too bad where they live right now. Along with the experts, they also expressed tendencies to see risks in a more individualised way. On the other hand, the migrant group and the rural group viewed new risks as something we have to deal with in the local context, 'local' in the sense that it is rooted in the social setting people belong to.⁸ The migrant group is categorised as being local rather than global, since they relate to specific places as 'localities' rather than dissolved cosmopolitan or global spaces (cf. Beck, 2004, Roudometof, 2005).

- Figure 1 -

⁸ Local context does not necessarily mean a single geographical space but, as we have seen, people with immigrant backgrounds tend to relate to places where they used to live or where relatives still live.

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Interpreting Beck's theory in terms of these two dimensions, the global—control quadrangle ought to describe the kind of late modern reflexive individual risk strategy found in risk society, an individual who is aware and engaged in controlling new risks from a global perspective. However, when we position our groups in the two-dimensional space we find them in the local—control quadrangle (migrants and rural groups) and the global—fatalism quadrangle (the urban and expert groups, but the expert group is closer to the local—fatalism quadrangle). None of the groups is located in the global—control quadrangle or the local—fatalism quadrangle. Our interpretation is that the individuals, whom Beck describes as aware and engaged in e.g. sub-politics, are not that many in contemporary Swedish society. We have tried to explore variation among different societal groups without selecting groups that are already active in e.g. environmental organisations, but different segments of the general population in accordance with Beck's theory (cf. Beck 1992). This means that investigating people having perceptions and strategies that fit either the global—control quadrangle or the local—fatalism quadrangle is a task for further research. Despite these empirical limitations, the two dimensional model is supported by the fact that we find variation along both dimensions among the investigated groups. It is also plausible to picture people engaged in Greenpeace or other international organisations positioned in the global—control quadrangle, and people who are affected by the consequences of new risks and have a strong attachment to a geographical place, e.g. people living in suburbs with a high degree of pollution, low income and few opportunities to move, in the local—fatalism quadrangle.

In this study we have operationalised Beck's theory of risk society in terms of people's perceptions and strategies, and the results show that our data does not support his thesis of a general development among the public towards a reflexive view of new

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risks; on the contrary, the different groups seem to manage new risks quite differently. They have similar perceptions, or rather lack of perceptions, of new risks, but the way in which they handle these risks differs according to their life context, or perhaps even their position in different modernities (cf. Therborn 2003). This empirical study of Beck's thesis can therefore not support his argument of the development into a risk society, at least not when it comes to people's perceptions and strategies among the investigated groups in Sweden. The thesis of entangled modernities defined as different population segment's life context, on the other hand, seems more plausible; that is, different groups, or segments, of the public can hold the same view about a particular risk, but the views are founded in different life contexts. Life context, plausible rooted in traditional, modern or late modern modernities, makes people handle risks differently, while for example national and global mass media influence the common perception of risks.

Grouping people according to these suggested dimensions might be fruitful in order to deepen our understanding of the multiple risk strategies that exist alongside each other in society. The local—control view, which might be labelled 'traditional', is supported by value protectionism and rooted in a spatial everyday context, and the global—fatalism view, labelled 'modern', is supported by individualistic values and not limited by geographical places (cf. Öhman 2002). In other words, we might be able to identify groups in society who at the same time are both entangled and distinctly different (cf. Therborn, 2003); they have the same view of new risks, but from different life contexts, resulting in different coping strategies. In this case, all groups have more or less the same perception of new risks, i.e. that they are of limited importance in everyday life, but they differ in their way of handling risks and the spatial context to which they relate.

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However, considering the size of the sample and the restriction to a single country, Sweden, we should not over estimate the results of the study. Further empirical investigation is needed, for example to test the model in other cultural and social settings. Finally, we wish to stress that these findings do not support the idea that there are new kinds of risks today compared with earlier periods; on the contrary, man-made, delayed or imminent risks have probably always existed. In addition, it is even more important to note that what makes people aware, concerned and engaged is not a question of whether a risk is new or has a particular characteristic, but whether or not it is a threat towards them personally, to their way of life and basic values.

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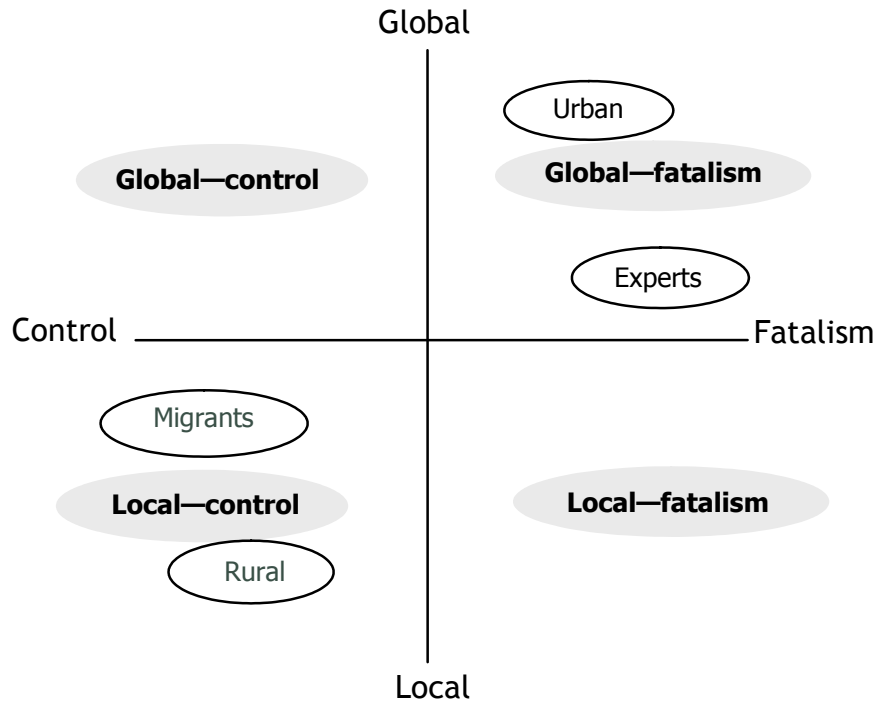


Figure 1. Graphic representation of the two-dimensional space of risk strategies.