In good company:

Risk, security and choice in young people's drug decisions

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Abstract

This article draws on original empirical research with young people to question the degree to which 'individualisation of risk', as developed in the work of Beck and Giddens, adequately explains the risks young people bear and take. It draws on alternative understandings and critiques of 'risk' not to refute the notion of the reflexive individual upon which 'individualisation of risk' is based but to re-read that reflexivity in a more hermeneutic way. It explores specific risk-laden moments – young people's drug use decisions - in their natural social and cultural context of the friendship group. Studying these decisions in context, it suggests, reveals the meaning of 'risk' to be not given, but constructed through group discussion, disagreement and consensus and decisions taken to be rooted in emotional relations of trust, mutual accountability and common security. The article concludes that 'the individualisation of risk' fails to take adequate account of the significance of intersubjectivity in risk-decisions. It argues also that addressing the theoretical overemphasis on the individual bearer of risk requires not only further empirical testing of the theory but appropriate methodological reflection.

Introduction

When young people weigh up the potential pleasure against the possible risk of saying 'yes' to an illicit drug offer they epitomise the interwoven nature of structure and agency in late modernity; they act as reflexive agents conducting a routine act of biography-construction within a world of globalised risk. These core concepts – the reflexive individual, the globalisation and individualisation of risk and the self as a project in the making – derive from the writings of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens on reflexive modernization and underpin contemporary sociological approaches to young people and the risks they bear and take. But, how robust are these concepts when applied to social processes embedded in everyday cultural practice? In this article original, empirical research into young people's drug using practices is drawn upon to question the degree to which risk-taking is rooted in individual, rational, cost-benefit assessments and, on the basis of this, to critique and refine the notion of the 'individualisation of risk' as a defining moment of late modern society.

The research upon which this article is based did not set out to study risk as such (perceptions or risk, propensities to risk-taking and protective buffers from it) but considered specific risk-laden moments - young people's drug-use decisions – within their natural social and cultural location of the friendship group. The research findings confirm that young people's drug choices are framed largely within dominant discourses of drug use (they are perceived as 'risky' behaviours with harmful physical, psychological and social consequences) and that young people monitor and assess the

expert knowledges which infuse this discourse. At the same time, the findings suggest that reflexivity is not solely a response to expert knowledge systems but draws on situated knowledges and produces ambiguous, contradictory and changing understandings of risk. These understandings often refute the pronouncements of experts and are not based on cognitive judgements alone but founded in aesthetic or hermeneutic judgements that are developed through acculturation and embodied in taste, style, leisure, popular culture and subcultural group membership (Lupton 1999: 118).

Research on young people's drug using practices is employed in this article, therefore, to provide a hermeneutic account of risk. Such an account suggests that even among young people – a social group considered to be highly vulnerable to 'disembedding' processes – evaluations of, and responses to, risk are collective as well as individual. The meaning of 'risk', it is argued, is not a given (and thus calculable via a cost-benefit assessment before an individual decision is made) but something that is constructed within the micro-context of its encounter. Moreover, the process of constructing the meaning of risk entails collective discussion, disagreement and consensus that are rooted in emotional relations of trust, mutual accountability and common security. Risk-decisions, it is concluded, are more than individual cognitive judgements constituting reflexive projects of the self and are thus only partially explained via the notion of the reflexive individual as the bearer of risk in late modernity.

Individualisation, risk and choice in late modernity

> '…in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an
>
> important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose.'
>
> (Giddens 1991: 81)

The pressure of choice in the uncertain environment of late modernity is all too familiar to young people. In the individualized society, according to Beck (1992: 135), the individual is required to plan and direct his or her own biography including their social identity and group membership. In this process 'choice' is often the poisoned chalice that Giddens suggests above since, although the declining influence of tradition and its institutions brings more freedom of choice, the choices on offer are fraught with uncertainties while responsibility for making the right choices – choices that produce a successful life trajectory - has become increasingly individualised. This is not to suggest that social structure no longer matters - Beck (1992: 41) himself notes 'a systematic "attraction" between extreme poverty and extreme risk' - but risks are seen as being global in their reach and equalizing in their effect, making structural inequalities less visible and experienced as personal insecurities or psychological deficiencies.

Negotiating, or responding to, 'risk', therefore, is as central to sociological understandings of the dynamics of late modernity as class and status are to the sociology of modernity. For Beck (1994: 6), it is the self-confrontation between the bases of modernization and the consequences of modernization that constitutes the 'reflexive

modernization' characterising contemporary society. Whereas the modernization process is characterised by attempts, at the state and societal level, to intervene, control and contain danger - thereby turning incalculable hazards into calculable risks – in the age of globalization the kinds of risk encountered render them increasingly difficult to calculate (Elliott 2002: 295-6). It is such 'self-confrontation' with the consequences of risk and the subsequent critical reflection upon the dangers of modernity that marks, for Beck, the difference between industrial society and 'risk society' (Lupton 1999: 66-7).

The understandings of late modernity in the writings of Beck and Giddens are mutually compatible albeit different in emphasis. For Giddens it is institutional and individual reflexivity in conditions of globalization and detraditionalisation that define late modernity. The disembedding mechanisms and accelerated globalization of late modernity make risks potentially more disastrous, but, at the same time - because individuals have greater recourse to expert knowledges in late modernity - they are considered more able to assess and manage risk for themselves (pp.73-6). Self-identity, in this way, becomes a 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens 1991: 5) in which life-planning is undertaken involving routine consideration of risks as filtered through expert knowledge. Beck (1992: 130) shares this vision of individuals constructing their own biographies in late modernity. However, he suggests that individualisation, although liberating individuals from traditional class and gender constraints, makes the individual more dependent upon key institutions of society, especially the labour market. 'The place of traditional ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family),' Beck (p.131) argues, 'is taken by secondary agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual

and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and

markets, contrary to the image of individual control which establishes itself in

consciousness'. This leads Furlong and Cartmel (1997: 114) to re-read Beck in a way that

retains a strong sense of the structural determinants of life chances, whilst acknowledging

that in late modernity risk is *experienced* in an individualised way. Referring specifically

to young people's experiences, they conclude that late modernity holds within it 'an

epistemological fallacy in which… individuals are forced to negotiate a set of risks which

impinge on all aspects of their daily lives, yet the intensification of individualism means

that crises are perceived as individual shortcomings rather than the outcome of processes

which are largely outside the control of individuals.'.

The over-emphasis on individuals' ability to reflect on, and shape, their life paths as an

active engagement with constant new flows of information and the failure to consider the

prospect that individualization may directly contribute to, and advance, the proliferation

of class inequalities and economic exclusions (Elliott 2002: 304) is an important criticism

of theories of reflexive modernization. Indeed, Elliott (p.310) goes further in suggesting

that risk itself is exaggerated to a level of importance in defining processes of social and

political change in late modernity that it does not merit. This problem is compounded by

the lack of clarity in the writing of Beck and Giddens about the status of the 'risks' under

discussion; both appear to argue that the dangers besetting late modernity are empirically

greater (or more far-reaching) due to their global scale and human self-generation, but

also that these dangers are merely socially constructed as greater. Indeed, Lupton (1999:

81) notes the differences in the formulation of the relationship between risk and

reflexivity here between Beck and Giddens. Beck, she says, implies that the heightened degree of risk reflexivity is the outcome of a greater number of risks being produced in the late modern era while Giddens argues that risks are not greater in number but are *thought* to be greater, because the nature of subjectivity in general makes us more sensitive to the possibility of risk than in previous eras.

Neither Beck nor Giddens would take this social constructionist position to its logical conclusion, however. Such a conclusion would be that not only 'risk' but also the underlying hazards upon which 'risk' is estimated[1] are constructed and then invoked discursively to support estimations of risk, risky behaviour and people who take such risks (Fox 1999: 19). Taking the example of the moral panic about Ecstasy use, Fox argues that the dangers of Ecstasy only exist for those for whom the risks of its use outweigh the pleasures. Those who use Ecstasy regularly look upon the drug through a different lens - one in which spiritual highs are valued more highly than biological risks – which renders the drug hazard-free in their eyes. Fox's (p.29) point is that 'people's behaviour must be seen not as based upon differential judgements of risk, but within the context of world views which may deviate greatly from that of the 'expert' risk assessor' and helps account for the apparent gap between young people's risk-taking behaviour and dominant perceptions of risk.

The discursive nature of 'risk' also underpins an important Foucauldian critique of dominant sociological understandings of risk society.[2] This critique suggests that it is risk strategies and discourses - as means of ordering the social and material worlds

through methods of rationalization and calculation - that bring risk into being by selecting certain phenomena as being 'risky' and therefore requiring management (by individuals or institutions). In this way, the conceptualization of risk is closely linked to ideas about how individuals should deport themselves in relation to the state (Lupton 1999: 102) and generates governmental practices that distinguish between *active citizens* (capable of managing their own risk) and *targeted populations* ('at risk' or 'high risk') who require intervention in the management of risks (Dean 1999: 147). Of particular significance to this discussion is the suggestion that risk rationalities and technologies are interwoven with contemporary liberal political programmes in such a way as to shift responsibility for risks – and their minimization - to individuals, families, households and communities (p.145). The subject of such neo-liberal discourse is the *rational choice actor* who calculates the benefits and costs, or risks, of acting in a certain way – drawing on a range of 'expert' sources - before acting; indeed it becomes the *responsibility* of the citizen to act in this way (p.146). This is particularly pertinent to understanding the discursive relationship between risk and young people. As Kelly (2003: 176) suggests, the 'fact' that young people have not developed the capacities necessary for conducting their freedom in a *well-regulated way* remains an important element of the rationalities that structure the practices and processes of surveillance, discipline and regulation of young people. Moreover, while weighing up potential pleasure against potential pain (harm, damage) lies at the heart of the liberal understanding of rational calculation, the pursuit of pleasure may also conflict with other requirements made of liberal subjects (responsibility, rationality, independence). Where this occurs – as in the case of 'excessive' alcohol and illicit drug use - dominant discourse dissociates drugs and alcohol use from 'pleasure'

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and 'enjoyment' and instead links them to compulsion, pain and pathology (O'Malley and Valverde 2004: 26-7).[3] Thus, approaching drug use from a Foucauldian perspective – through, for example, the study of forms and practices of self-subjection - allows one to incorporate notions of 'pleasure' in the understanding of risk without resorting to a simple notion of the autonomous, rational (albeit reflexive) individual (Petersen 1997: 202).

For the purposes of the argument set out here, however, the most important critique of notions of risk and individualization in the writings of Beck and Giddens relates to the failure to set risk decisions in their social and cultural contexts. This absence is most succinctly summarized in the statement by Douglas (1992: 12) that 'No one takes a decision that involves costs without consulting neighbours, family, work, friends'. This is a claim that Douglas makes on the basis of empirical observation that risk decisions – no matter how trivial – are taken in emotional environments and are underpinned by assumptions about mutual accountability. By placing the focus on individual cognition alone, she says, risk perception analysts avoid the real issue for this says nothing about intersubjectivity, consensus making, or social influences on decisions.

This critique has been taken up by others to expose the way in which macro-sociological notions of 'risk society', in their focus on individualization, pay insufficient attention to the communal, aesthetic and shared symbolic aspects of risk (Lupton 1999: 82). Lash (1994: 111), for example, challenges the presupposition in the work of Beck and Giddens that reflexivity is essentially 'cognitive' in nature and calls for consideration of the ways

in which people respond emotively and aesthetically to risk as members of cultural subgroups rather than as atomized individuals. He points to the role played by unarticulated assumptions, moral values and practices in people's responses to risk and argues that these are shared, developed through acculturation and often non-reflexive in that they are taken-for-granted. A related criticism is that the reflexivity thesis is insensitive to the complexity and ambiguousness of perceptions of risk. This is because it too readily assumes that individuals develop and exercise reflexivity in response to universalising expert knowledges, rather than generating their own risk knowledges, which are, by definition, more situational, more localised and thus more incorporating of contradiction, diversity and change (Lupton 1999: 106). Lupton and Tulloch's (2002: 331) study of perceptions of risk among Australian youth illustrates this. Although broadly confirming that young people have taken on the tenets of individualization as described by Beck - in representing crises, fears and anxieties as self-produced, individual problems of 'personal biography' - they found that when discussing those risks to which respondents felt that the population *in general* were exposed, they revealed a politicized social consciousness of the structural underpinnings of risks.

Lupton and Tulloch's research is illustrative of the growing interest in the empirical study of risk perception and risk-taking among young people in recent years. Such research has suggested that structural factors, such as socio economic status, do not directly determine health risk behaviours (including drug use) in adolescence (Tuinstra, Groothoff, Van Den Heuvel and Post 1998). For some authors this confirms the notion of the individualisation of risk and suggests that, for young people, risk management has become routinised to

such an extent that 'drug users are essentially extending the same decision-making processes to illicit drugs as others do in respect of cigarette smoking or drinking alcohol or indeed horse riding, hang gliding or mountaineering' (Parker, Aldridge and Measham 1998: 158). This echoes both Giddens's vision of the 'risk society' as 'living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative' (Giddens 1991: 28) but also social theories of the body in which discipline and hedonism are seen as intertwined in individual strategies of 'calculating hedonism' (Jacoby 1980: p.63 cited in Featherstone 1991: 171). For others, however, the socio-cultural context of risk perception and risk-taking decisions has remained central to understanding young people's responses to risk. Such researchers have explored the significance of a range of social variables such as gender, ethnicity and religiosity in raising or lowering young people's resilience to drug-taking (see, for example: Sweeting and West 2003; Green, Mitchell and Bunton 2000; Abbott-Chapman and Denholm 2001). The role of social capital (access, or lack of it, to social, cultural and economic resources) and social networks (and the position of individuals within such networks) in facilitating or inhibiting specific risk behaviours has also been studied. (see, for example: Lovell 2002; Miller and Neaigus 2001; Rhodes, Singer, Bourgois, Friedmand and Strathdee 2005; Lundborg 2005). These studies, moreover, reveal that the very bonds that expose individuals to risk can act also as important mechanisms of support and sites of trust (Rhodes and Quirk 1998, Latkina, Forman, Knowlton and Sherman 2003). Rhodes and Quirk (1998: 158), for example, have shown how the nature of drug users' social relationships - specifically their sexual relationships – not only significantly influences risk-taking practices (such as needle sharing) but also determines whether such practices

are interpreted as 'risky' or, on the contrary, as an act of intimacy and trust. Thus, research to date on young people and risk-taking continues to struggle with balancing the relative importance of structure, context and agency. It broadly affirms the notion of the 'individualisation of risk' whilst acknowledging, to a greater or lesser extent, the significance of the socio-cultural context of risk-taking. Young people's response to risk, it might be concluded, is contradictory and complex as they seek to control risk whilst simultaneously professing the importance of selective voluntary risk-taking (Lupton and Tulloch 2002: 332).[4]

This cursory overview of theoretical approaches to the individualisation of risk has revealed two major fault lines: a theoretical tendency to view reflexivity as wholly individual; and a resultant empirical tendency to underestimate the role of intersubjectivity in risk decisions. The empirical part of this article starts with an outline of the methodological approach of the study from which empirical data are drawn and is then divided into two sections broadly addressing these two lines of critique. The first section considers the group context of drug use and what this says about the nature of reflexivity at work when young people encounter 'risk'. The second section examines drugs decisions themselves focusing, in particular, on the apparent contradiction between their narration as individual choices and the processes of the construction and sharing of risk within friendship groups that provide young people's frame of reference for making these decisions.

Methods

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The empirical data drawn on in this article comes from original research conducted in the Russian Federation in 2002-03.[5] Fieldwork was conducted in three regions of the country - Krasnodar territory, Samara region and Komi Republic[6] – and in three towns or cities within each region[7]. Due to the paucity of qualitative data on drug use in Russia, the project, at a general level, aimed to explore attitudes to, and practices of, drug use in their youth cultural context (Pilkington 2006; Pilkington forthcoming). However, it included also the more specific aim of evaluating the cross-cultural applicability of the 'normalisation thesis of recreational drug use'[8] (Parker, Aldridge and Measham 1998) to the Russian context. While this thesis does not explicitly operationalise the theory of 'individualisation of risk', Parker et al (1998: 158) consider their findings on the normalisation of recreational drug use to be 'consistent' with the notion of the individualisation of risk and describe drugs decisions as 'cost-benefit assessments' leading to 'rational decisions about consumption' (p.154). In seeking to evaluate this thesis therefore, the project in Russia investigated the nature, context and process of making decisions about drugs and generated data that speak directly to the question of the nature of reflexivity.

The distinctive aspect of the research design is its attention to the context of drug decisions and drug use. Most current research into drugs decisions notes the importance of the peer group context of drug use but is unable to unravel its significance. This is partly a result of dominant theoretical paradigms, whose focus on the reflexive individual means that respondent narratives are treated as constantly under reconstruction but nonetheless individually authored. It is compounded, however, by the methodologies

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used in the study of risk behaviours including drug use. Survey methods, while effective

for determining the prevalence of specific risk behaviours, can only explain such

behaviour in terms of individual psychological motivations ('to forget my problems', 'to

lift my mood', 'out of curiosity'). Even biographical accounts, based on interview

methods, require of young people a coherent narrative that retells the story of the drugs

career as a reflexive project of the self. MacIntosh and McKeganey have pointed to the

importance here of 'significant others' in the construction of drugs stories arguing that the

similarity between addicts' own accounts of their recovery and those of professional drug

workers may be less to do with the intrinsic nature of recovery itself than with the fact

that recovering addicts often come to understand and articulate their recovery within and

through dialogue with drugs professionals (MacIntosh and McKeganey 2000: 1508).

However, even where the researcher is not directly complicit in the narrative

construction, the interview method's emphasis on individual articulation of experience

extracts and isolates that individual from the interpersonal relationships which may be

central to it. Research using interview methods alone, therefore, is in danger of

predetermining its conclusion that individuals are the sole bearers of risk. Recognising

the limitations of the individual as a basic unit of sociological investigation (Park 1972:

29), therefore, an ethnographic element was incorporated into the research design of the

empirical research outlined here, in order to at least provide for the possibility of seeing

beyond the individual. The integration of survey, interview and ethnographic elements, it

was supposed, would illuminate some of the dynamics of risk-taking behaviours and

allow individual decisions to be viewed within their social and cultural context (in this

instance, friendship groups). To this end the project employed three main data gathering

methods[9]: a representative survey; semi-structured interviews; and intensive ethnographic studies.

The representative survey was conducted among a regionally based representative sample of 14-19 year olds (n=2814) accessed via educational institutions in each of the nine fieldwork sites.[10] Semi-structured interviews (n=95) were conducted in parallel with the survey in each of the nine towns and cities. Respondents were invited to participate in interviews of 45-90 minutes' duration following completion of the questionnaire. Interviews were conducted anonymously and took place either immediately after completion of questionnaires, usually in an empty classroom, school yard or on a bench close to the school, or in another (public) place at a convenient time for the respondent. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using ATLAS.ti employing a common coding scheme.

Ethnographic studies were undertaken in three field sites - Sochi, Vorkuta and Chapaevsk - with a total of nineteen friendship groups of young people. A young researcher was located in each of these sites for a period of six weeks in Spring 2003. Initially contacts were taken up with respondents who had offered their help during the survey or interview stages of fieldwork but researchers subsequently followed their respondents into their friendship circles and were not bound by the 'quota' criteria of the survey and semi-structured interview elements of the project. Thus participants involved in the ethnographic elements of the project were sometimes younger than 14 or older than 19. The researchers were supported by two training sessions prior to fieldwork and used

mobile phones and internet cafés to maintain frequent contact whilst in the field. Each researcher compiled a diary of observations and invited key respondents to assist the research by making their own diaries (audio or written). Researchers and respondents also included photos in their diaries and collected local artefacts such as posters, fliers and musical recordings.

The group context of drug-use decisions: individual versus hermeneutic reflexivity

In order to understand the nature of reflexivity involved in young people's 'risk-behaviour' it is vital that the context of the decisions they make is retained. Young people's primary point of contact with drugs[11] is their friendship group (*kompaniia*[12]). Almost half (43%) of respondents surveyed reported that illicit drugs[13] were used by people within their immediate friendship group and more than a quarter (28%) had been offered drugs free or to buy by members of that group. It is interview narratives, however, that reveal the significance of these data. For young people in friendship groups where drugs circulate, drugs decisions are not one-off events but routine, as is evident from the following interview excerpt in which the respondent describes repeated offers of heroin (metaphorically referred to as 'relaxing'):

Respondent: 'It wasn't the first time [that I had been offered heroin], but each time it was roughly the same. It was always one of my acquaintances who suggested going 'to relax'. But I knew what he was suggesting as a means of relaxation and for that reason said straightway not to count on me. He goes,

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"let's relax together, just to keep me company (*za kompaniiu*)". And I would

say straightaway "Don't count on me".'

Interviewer: 'What was he offering you?'

Respondent: 'Heroin. There's more heroin than anything else here at the

moment.'

(Tol'iatti, male, 18 years, 'regular user'[14])

The invitation to use heroin 'to keep me company' ('*za kompaniiu*') presents the drug use

decision to the respondent not as a fateful decision requiring risk-assessment, but as a

routine act of companionship within the friendship group (*kompaniia*). The respondent

went on to describe how, after initially refusing these offers, he had agreed to join his

friend in heroin use when he was 'feeling down'. Thus the respondent's decision to begin

what subsequently became a long term drug use practice is framed more in emotional

need and friendship obligations than in a rational assessment of relative pleasure and risk.

Where the drug on offer is cannabis, decisions to use are reported in an even more

routine, almost non-reflexive way:

'If someone brings [a smoke]. Well, okay, we'll go try it.'

(Tol'iatti, female, 16 years, 'experimenter')

Interviewer: 'And, if you think back to when you smoked cannabis, can you

recall why?'

Respondent: 'There wasn't any reason. It was just to relax, I don't know, just
a typical evening.'

(Chapaevsk, female, 16 years, 'regular user')

The respondent here might appear evasive but her answer is profoundly
informative. The extended interview releases her from the obligation of
constructing a 'reason for action' and allows her to articulate instead the 'motive'
for her drug use in the form of an underlying 'vibe' or 'mood' within the friendship
group. This is what Giddens (1991: 63-4) refers to as an underlying 'feeling state'
involving unconscious forms of affect and provides a concrete illustration of the
hermeneutic dimension of reflexivity that is central to understanding risk decisions
that occur as part of routine behaviour rather than as a product of active self-
monitoring.

The nature of the 'feeling state' accompanying drug use varies between groups, drugs and
particular situations; what remains constant is the direct connection respondents make
between the pleasure and excitement of drug use and its group context. This is illustrated
by the following examples of three quite different group vibes:

'Doing it on your own would be no fun. I have never tried on my own.'
(Vorkuta, male, 19 years, 'regular user')

Respondent: 'I can go without smoking [cannabis], in principle, I can go

without. But sometimes I just want to, especially here at college…. We come

before lunch and have a smoke and then eat. Then we go to our lessons, and

your nose is put to the grindstone (*gruzish'sia*). You get sick of it… you don't

feel like writing. So, instead, we have a smoke, and the whole lesson we let

rip. Sometimes we just can't stop laughing and the teacher says, "I don't

understand what's up with you."'

(Ukhta, female, 16 years, 'regular user')

Respondent: 'Well, if they enjoy a bit of weed, have a laugh, then it's okay.

But if they were doing smack (*gerych*), or cocaine… then it's not the same.'

Interviewer: 'Why isn't that okay? What's not okay about it?'

Respondent: 'What's not okay? Well we would always be watching them

stick stuff into their vein. That's no fun, watching all that.'

(Vorkuta, male, 16 years, 'abstainer')

For the first respondent the use of drugs outside the group context is simply unimaginable

and thus the meaning of drug use is wholly constituted by the group vibe. The second

quote illustrates how the individually experienced boredom of another day at college is

turned into a pleasurable, collective experience through cannabis use. Here risk is not a

burden that one bears but flirtations with risk and rebellious behaviour create an

excitement and partial release from routine constraints and boundaries (Lupton 1999:

148) that is experienced as deeply pleasurable. The role of drug use in 'wiping away' the

difficulties and tedium of everyday life is explored extensively in MacDonald and

Marsh's (2005: 182) study of the connection between drug use and criminal careers in

North-East England while the similarity between 'thrill' related risk taking and other

forms of risk-taking (such as drug use) is confirmed by Essau's (2004: 509) study of risk-

taking among young people in Germany. This second quote also illustrates the

hermeneutic – as opposed to purely cognitive – dimensions of reflexivity as the

respondent articulates monotony as being experienced individually '*your* nose is put to

the grindstone', '*you* get sick of it' while the pleasure of risk is collective ('*we* have a

smoke [and] *we* let rip'). The group vibe does not always *encourage* drug use, however,

and the final quote illustrates the commonplace situation in which the group drive

constrains the pleasure principle by reference to a collectively approved aesthetic (there's

'no fun' in watching friends 'stick stuff into their vein').

Such collective construction of boundaries with regard to drugs decisions is normally

reinforced by reference to the chemical properties of particular drugs and the 'effects'

these have on the individual and the group and this is discussed in the next section of the

article. For the purposes of understanding the *nature of reflexivity* exhibited by young

'risk-takers', however, it is not the boundaries themselves so much as the source and

circulation of the knowledge that underpins them that is significant. It is this which

indicates the degree to which young people behave as classic 'reflexive individuals'

drawing upon information from 'expert systems' in order to assess risk.

The research described here showed that young people in Russia are exposed to, and engage with, expert information on drugs. However, in making their drugs decisions they draw on a situated knowledge composed of critical assessments of this expert information alongside peer-group derived experience. The balance between these two components is determined first and foremost by the individual respondents' own drugs experience. Respondents with no immediate (personal, familial or close friendship group) experience of drug use are most likely to cite and value information about drugs received from 'experts' (teachers, drugs specialists, police) although, in the absence of any personal experience to filter such messages, they often re-articulate information drawn from dominant discourse after embellishing it with details from the realm of urban folk legend. With age, and/or increasing contact with drugs, respondents encounter an increasing contradiction between dominant discourse and personal experience. As a result, they articulate an increasingly critical attitude to 'expert knowledge' based on their own experience:

> 'It's just that there's a lot of it - they even came to our school and talked
> about it [drugs]. There's a lot of exaggeration. It's just simply that they have
> had little contact with people who talk openly, those who have used them
> [drugs]. Because you're not going to say everything in front of a doctor, no
> way… They said for example that you start by using a certain dose of
> drugs… but the dose gradually gets bigger. .. But from what the people I've
> talked to say, they go on taking the same dose. Those I have talked to say if

you take more, then you're going to overdose, if you take less you will start to

get withdrawal symptoms, so [you stay on the same dose]...'

(Slaviansk, male, 18 years 'regular user')

While this suggests that young people do indeed reflect on expert information when making drugs decisions, the knowledge young people *rely on* about drugs derives primarily from their peer group. Thus the above respondent, when describing how he first decided to try cannabis, references his knowledge of cannabis from the experience of seeing others in his group smoke it:

Interviewer: 'You said that you had smoked a few times. How did that come about…?'

Respondent: 'I don't know really. It was just interesting to try. The thing is, I know that with cannabis, you don't get addicted to it… And also there are no withdrawal symptoms. And the lads who smoke it constantly, there's none of this [difficulty in giving up], they just give it up and are just normal, there's nothing up with them.'

(Slaviansk, male, 18 years, 'regular user')

Thus while young people do engage with expert information, their sharing of information about drugs based on the experience of seeing drugs used by friends generates a qualitatively different kind of knowledge. This 'situated' knowledge is as much rooted in trust and friendship as in reliable information and is evaluated

less in terms of its accuracy than by its affective, mutually binding quality. In the eyes of young people this makes it more rather than less reliable.

In the real life contexts of young people's routine drug use decisions the reflexivity at work is not always individual and cognitive, it is also hermeneutic and aesthetic. Risk decisions are made in group contexts where the group vibe of 'having fun', 'chilling out' or 'letting rip' frames the 'feeling state' of the individual and generates a - partially conscious - motivation for drug use where a reflexive 'reason' for such is absent. The implication of the recognition of the hermeneutic and aesthetic nature of reflexivity is that if risk is not rationally assessed by young people as reflexive individuals then it may follow that there is reason to doubt also that it is borne by them in an individualised way.

Beyond the reflexive individual: Constructing and sharing risk

> 'It depends on you yourself. If you want to yourself, then you will. If you
> don't want to, you won't. You're never, like, forced to do it…'
> (Ukhta, male, 23 years, current 'abstainer', past 'regular user')

In their narratives of drug debuts and subsequent drugs decisions young people are adamant that the choices they make are individual ones. Confirming the respondent quoted above, 95.5% of respondents participating in the survey element of the study felt they had never been in a situation where they or their friends had been pressured to try drugs. That young people narrate their drugs decisions as individual choices is not

disputed[15]; the imperative to narrate one's life as a project of the self – in video diaries, via mobile phone snapshots and blog writing – is, after all, central to late modern societies. Rather, it is argued, this narration should not be interpreted as reflecting the empirical reality of the individualisation of risk in contemporary society but should be viewed as a constituent part of complex intersubjective relations that frame and support responses to risk. This is articulated particularly clearly by the following respondent who imagines making her own decision about future drug use but envisages that decision as inextricably bound up with its intersubjective context:

Interviewer: 'So if you were offered what you called 'soft drugs', cannabis or something, would you refuse, or not? Or would it depend on the situation, and who offered you it?'

Respondent: 'It would depend on the situation probably [laughs].'

Interviewer: 'And in what situation might you say 'yes' and in what 'no'?'

Respondent: 'Probably I would say 'yes' if it was people I knew really well and felt at ease and confident. If it were people I didn't know, I would say 'no'.'

(Tol'iatti, female, 18 years, 'future user')

The absence of any reference to 'risk' as such in this interview fragment is also revealing. It is indicative of the respondent set as a whole and turns the individualisation of risk thesis on its head; risk is not borne individually *because* young people are disembedded

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from traditional social structures and relations, but rather risk is constructed by them as a consequence of the absence of secure intersubjective relations.

This young woman's prerequisite for choosing to experiment with drug use - 'feeling at ease and confident' - expresses a clear trope in accounts of drug decisions in this research; young people's narratives are infused more with notions of security, trust and mutual accountability than they are with 'risk'. In making drugs choices - regardless of whether the choice itself is to use, experiment with, or abstain from drugs - it is the friendship group which is the key reference point for young people and provides a safe and secure context in which to make those choices.

For abstainers, security is often constructed by banishing risk – in this case drugs and drug users - to something that lies beyond their sphere of acquaintance:

> 'No, we haven't talked about it. We don't talk about things like drugs. Except
> as a laugh like… These drug addicts aren't treated seriously. Everyone just
> hates them.'
> (Tol'iatti, male, 19 years, 'abstainer')

> 'Well, yeah, we said that if anyone was to start taking drugs, like, then we
> couldn't be friends with them.'
> (Sochi, male, 15 years, 'abstainer')

In this way the abstaining group constructs a protective cocoon against existential

anxieties (Giddens 1991: 39) through the relegation of the threat to something that is,

quite literally, 'unspeakable' or 'untouchable'.

Within friendship groups where drugs do circulate, security is maintained through the

policing of the observance of group norms of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' drug use.

This is articulated in the following interview excerpt in which the respondent (a regular

cannabis user) expresses hesitancy about trying a substance you can 'get hooked on'

(usually a metaphor for heroin):

> 'Yes, we'd be prepared to help if someone suddenly got hooked. But they
>
> [others in the group] would never do that [get hooked] themselves. Nor me
>
> I'd be afraid that if I got into that situation, then I know that the lads, that
>
> many of them, would turn their backs on me...'
>
> (Belorechensk, male, 16 years, 'regular user')

What is interesting here is that although group norms ostensibly serve to shut out the kind

of drug use that is considered 'risky', the understanding of that 'risk' by the respondent

has become dissociated from the chemical properties of the drug and is experienced as a

risk to ontological security; he fears not the addictive nature of the substance so much as

being abandoned by the group for trying it. Drawing on ethnographic research with

intravenous drug users Margaret Connors (1992: 560) identifies a similar act of juggling

'paradox and chance' in the search for security as individuals seek to minimize one risk

(of arrest) by sharing 'works' but in so doing raise the risk of HIV infection. A similar pattern of 'risk management' among intravenous drug users has been identified more recently by Rhodes et al (2003) in the Russian city of Tol'iatti. All three of these empirical examples indicate that, within drug-using peer groups, risk hierarchies are: profoundly determined by their context, often at odds with expert risk assessment, and generated and sustained at the intersubjective not individual level.

There is one more vital dimension to the sharing of risk; not only are young people's understandings of risk rooted in shared conventions but their responses to risk are constructed within a communal context based on mutual trust and obligation (Lupton 1999: 38). Such mutual obligation is illustrated vividly in the following extract from an interview with Igor'[16] taken during the course of the ethnographic study in Vorkuta:

'I have always been opposed to it. Personally I have always been against smoking [cannabis] but the others are free to decide for themselves. As for being opposed to *vint*, [17] I would never [take it] and I will keep the others off it. Anyone who uses *vint* – that's it, I'll smack them. I've even had to punch them in the kidneys so that they understand what I expect from them, what I am getting at. They complained to me "But… I only tried once." And I said "Try again and I'll hang you from the tower".'

(Igor', Vorkuta, male, 18 years, 'abstainer').

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Igor's aggressively negative attitude to drugs follows the loss of a close friend to a drug overdose and he is clearly struggling to resolve the contradiction between his new assertive anti-drugs position, his own earlier heavy alcohol use and tolerance of the cannabis use of his friends. He narrates his story as a personal crusade to protect his friends from what he perceives to be the 'threat' of drugs and he uses his own authority within the 'gang' structure of this particular friendship group to achieve this aim. There can be no clearer exposition than that found in Igor's story of why our theoretical and methodological paradigms need to start not with an image of an isolated individual but by looking at culture as a 'system of persons holding one another mutually accountable' (Douglas 1992: 31).

Conclusion

The 'individualization of risk' has become accepted in mainstream sociological debates as an empirical fact of late modernity. Even critics of Beck and Giddens, whilst arguing for more attention to be paid to the social structures that determine life chances and thus propensity to 'risk', confirm that young people in late modernity experience risk increasingly 'on their own'. In this article, however, it is argued that this understanding of the experience of risk is one-dimensional and predetermined by theoretical and methodological approaches which start and end with the individual (p.x). Drawing on original empirical research into young people's engagements with a particular late modern 'risk' – drug offers – it is suggested that young people may narrate their risk experiences and responses as individual ones but that, in making their drugs 'choices',

they draw heavily on narratives of risk and security that are developed collectively within their friendship groups.

It is not the notion of the reflexive self per se that is being challenged; the evidence that young people are knowledgeable about, and reflect on, drug decisions is indisputable. From the vantage point of hindsight or academic abstraction, moreover, such decisions may appear as 'fateful moments' in the reflexive biography when individuals seek expert advice before making a decision (Giddens 1991: 112). Observing and listening to young people's accounts of risk encounters in their actual social and cultural context, however, suggests that, in practice, their decisions deviate substantially from this model of the self-monitoring individual. Drugs decisions are generally not 'fateful moments' but routine, motivated by a group 'vibe' and informed by situated not expert knowledges. This confirms the arguments put forward by Douglas, Lash and Lupton for the extension of the reflexive self to recognise not only cognitive modes of reflexivity but also the hermeneutic and aesthetic dimensions of reflexivity within late modernity. However, it does not mean - as Fox (1999) argues - that drug users inhabit a distinct subcultural world where 'pleasure rules'. The research reported here suggests rather that both drug-using and drug-abstaining friendship groups articulate elements of dominant anti-drugs discourse whilst suspending those views within peer group situations where mutual bonds of trust, security and responsibility are experienced as protection from 'objective risk'.

The recognition of this hermeneutic dimension to reflexivity – the fact that young people's primary point of reference in making drugs decisions is other young people –

casts doubt on whether their choices are purely individual and whether risk is experienced by them in a wholly individualized way. Indeed, studying respondents' narratives of drugs decisions suggests that young people's friendship groups are more than the vehicle for the expression of the consumer choices that make up individual 'lifestyles'. They are often the primary source of explicit emotional support for young people (Glendinning, Pak and Popkov 2005: 46) and provide spaces of emotional trust and mutual obligation in which collective responses to risk are generated. Thus, in relation to young people, Giddens (1991: 125) is wrong to see individuals responding to risk through the establishment of 'a portfolio of risk assessment'. The negotiation of risk takes place rather as a process of collective security building on the basis of mutual trust and communality embedded in friendship groups and allows for both decisions to experiment with, but also to abstain from, drug use. Moreover, the importance of mutual obligation and trust in underpinning the collective security of friendship groups should not be underestimated. As Elliott (2002: 305) notes, in the context of the desocialization of risk, those with few educational, symbolic and cultural resources with which to undertake risk management are likely to find themselves further disadvantaged and marginalized in a new world order of reflexive modernization. In light of this, one might see practices and narratives of drug use among young people as a natural response to the privatization of risk; the territorially-based friendship group is one of the few resources available to young people and these peer groups become the repositories of collective security.

This article concludes that young people's understandings of, and responses to, risk are shaped within a peer group context that both provides the opportunities for risk-taking but

also generates a secure environment in which to negotiate those risks. In the friendship group - as within the family (Lupton and Tulloch 2002: 324) and intimate relationships (Rhodes and Quirk 1998) - risks are perceived as shared and are borne collectively not individually. Thus when young people routinely negotiate the risks of late modernity, they are 'in good company' and it is this collective process of responding to risk that is underestimated in the theory of 'the individualisation of risk'.

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[1] Indeed a further criticism of Beck, in particular, is that he fails to distinguish adequately between 'hazard' and 'risk' (Turner 2004: 256).

[2] For the purposes of the argument here these are taken to be those concerned with the differences between calculable risk (during modernization) and incalculable risk (during reflexive modernization) and the implications of this for society (see Dean 1999).

[3] However, the politics of the engagement between the discourse of the neo-liberal subject and drug policy and practice are not as clear cut as this might suggest. Moore and Fraser (2006), for example, suggest that although neo-liberal discourse diverts attention away from structural issues and limits the range of policy strategies available, it can be empowering for drug users in that it positions them potentially also as autonomous, rational and responsible citizens. On the other hand, the failure to recognise real material constraints on actors runs the risk that drug users may be further stigmatised as they are seen to fail to act as true subjects of neoliberal discourse.

[4] Indeed, Peretti-Watela and Moatti (2006) argue that voluntary risk-taking is a response (taking the form of 'innovative deviance') to the constant bombardment with new 'risks' encountered in late modernity. By consciously choosing to take risks, they suggest, young people reject their positioning as 'at risk' and regain a sense of self-determination and control.

[5] This research was conducted with the financial support of the ESRC (Ref. R000239439) and a full report of its findings is available electronically (see Pilkington 2004). The project was a collaborative one between the University of Birmingham, UK and Ul'ianovsk State University, Russian Federation. It was designed and led on the UK side by Hilary Pilkington and, on the Russian side, by Elena Omel'chenko. This article was written by Hilary Pilkington but is based on research conducted by the whole team which consisted of: Hilary Pilkington, Elena Omel'chenko, Erica Richardson, Natal'ia Goncharova, Evgeniia Luk'ianova, Ol'ga Dobroshtan, Irina Kosterina and El'vira Sharifullina. The team was assisted in the regions of fieldwork by Svetlana Iaroshenko, Oleg Oberemko, Dmitrii Nechaevskii, Aleksandr Shekhtman and Svetlana Teslia.

[6] These regions were chosen to reflect a geographical spread from the far South to the far North of the country and to capture the full diversity of drug markets in Russia: Krasnodar Territory borders the Black Sea in the South of Russia and is a natural cannabis growing area; Samara region is in the Volga region of European Russia and is a central crossroads for drug trafficking routes from Afghanistan to Western Europe; and Komi Republic is in the climatically harsh Far North of Russia and is isolated both from domestic production areas and normal trafficking routes.

[7] In each case one site was the second city in the region - Vorkuta, Tol'iatti and Sochi - and two were medium-sized cities/towns (50-120,000 population). In Komi Republic these were Ukhta and Pechora, in Samara Region, Chapaevsk and Otradnoe and in Krasnodar Territory Belorechensk and Slaviansk na Kubani.

[8] The 'normalisation thesis' emerged from a major empirical study of young people's drug using practices in the North West of England in the 1990s and its main propositions are summarised in Parker, Aldridge and Measham 1998: 153-7.

[9] Expert interviews with personnel from key agencies in drugs education work in Vorkuta, Tol'iatti and Sochi formed an additional, although more discrete, element of the project. Data from this part of the study are not drawn on for the purposes of this article.

[10] These data are touched on only briefly in this paper but further details of both the results and the methodological underpinnings of this element of the work can be found in the project's final report (see Pilkington 2004).

[11] Particular attention was paid to the distinctions young people make between types of drugs but, for the purposes of this article, such distinctions are not always significant and thus 'drugs' is used frequently as a shorthand. Nevertheless, readers should note that drug use in Russia is predominantly cannabis use - in this research 80% of all respondents who reported life-time use of any drug reported that drug to be cannabis. This is significant because cannabis is particularly associated with 'group' use. However, even heroin use (the second most widely used drug in Russia) has a distinctly social dimension (see Pilkington 2006).

[12] '*Kompaniia*' is the most common Russian term for a friendship group. It is encountered mainly with reference to young people although can be used also of adult friendship groups. It was adopted in this study to describe peer groupings since, unlike other possible terms such as *tusovka*, *banda* or *gruppirovka*, it carries no particular subcultural connotation.

[13] Young people were asked separately about their experiences of smoking and alcohol use. The term 'illicit drugs', therefore, refers to cannabis, and other hemp-based products, opiates including heroin, amphetamines, including Ecstasy, a range of drugs available from pharmacies and toxic substances such as glue.

[14] Respondents are referred to by place of residence, gender, age and drug-using status. Drug-using status is determined by responses to a question during the semi-structured interview when respondents were invited to choose one of 14 descriptions of their personal drug experience. These responses were used to classify respondents into four broad categories: 'abstainers' (*otkazniki*) capturing those choosing the descriptor 'have never tried any drug and never will' or 'have experimented with drugs but now abstain'; 'experimenters' (*razoviki*) indicating respondents who described their drugs experience in terms of a single or series of one-off 'experiments' with drugs; 'regular users' (*regulatory*) designating respondents who described their use as repeated and regular; and 'future users' (*budushchie*) describing respondents who are current abstainers but do not rule out future use.

[15] This tendency towards the narration of drugs decisions as individual choices despite the real structural constraints faced by respondents is documented also by Moore and Fraser (2006: 3038).

[16] Respondents captured in the ethnographic studies are referred to by name (pseudonym) in addition to gender, age and residence data cited for interview respondents (see footnote 14).

[17] *Vint* is a methamphetamine solution that became popular on the Russian youth cultural scene in the 1980s. Its active precursor, ephedrine is extracted from the ephedra shrub and is part of many over-the-counter and prescription medications such as cough syrups. This is either 'brewed' at home or sold in ampules or 'ready to go' syringes.