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The Psychology of Risk

Risk surrounds and envelops us. Without understanding it, we risk everything and without capitalising on it, we gain nothing. This accessible new book from Glynis M. Breakwell comprehensively explores the psychology of risk, examining how individuals think, feel and act, as well as considering the institutional and societal assessments, rhetorics and reactions about risk. Featuring chapters on all the major issues in the psychology of risk including risk assessment, hazard perception, decision-making, risk and crisis management, risk and emotion, risk communication, safety cultures, the social amplification and social representation of risk, and mechanisms for changing risk responses, Breakwell uses illustrations and examples to bring to life the significance of her research findings. She provides an innovative overview of current knowledge on the subject but also suggests that there are many fascinating questions still to be answered.

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This book is dedicated with love and respect to my father, Harold Breakwell, whose approach to risk is unpredictable and inspirational.

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Preface

Risk surrounds us, it envelops us. It is our personal and societal preoccupation and our salvation. Without understanding it we risk everything, and without capitalising upon it we gain nothing. This book comprehensively explores the psychology of risk. This entails examining how individuals think, feel and act about risks but, as importantly, it includes analysis of institutional and societal assessments, rhetorics and reactions to risks.

The object of this book is to provide a detailed overview of the empirical research that has been conducted on the psychology of risk and to piece together the theoretical and practical implications of the data. It is not representing a single theoretical model or standpoint. It is designed to be critically inclusive – that is, to offer a review of the full variety of explanations that have been developed and to present their respective pros and cons. There is no theoretical monolith that can currently encompass all of the interesting questions concerning the psychology of risk. Perhaps there never will be since risk and its corollaries are so multi-faceted. However, there are many medium-range explanatory models and these are all considered here.

While no single analytical model is privileged in the book, it does have a metatheoretical perspective that underlies it. This is an approach to the development of psychological theory which is described in Chapter 1. It essentially calls for an approach to the creation of explanatory models in psychology that provides an integrated analysis at a variety of levels from the individual (in terms of cognition, emotion and action) through the interpersonal and institutional (in terms of structural and processual determinants of influence and control) to the societal (through physical and ideological contexts). This approach to the evaluation and development of psychological theory informs the evaluation offered of each of the medium-range models presented in the account of the psychology of risk contained in the book.

The book is organised into chapters that reflect major issues in the psychology of risk: hazard perception, individual and group differences in

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risk perceptions, decision-making about risks, risk and emotion, risk communication, errors, accidents and emergencies, risk and complex organisations, the social amplification and social representation of risk and, finally, changing risk responses. In some senses, the presentation is linear and cumulative (each chapter builds upon its predecessors) in that, for instance, it is easier to understand issues concerning decision-making regarding risk if the groundwork on hazard perception is established. However, each chapter should provide a coherent analysis of its topic and be capable of standing alone, and it is possible to dip into the book selectively for specific topics. This is relevant because the book should be useful to different audiences, ranging from the student who wishes to understand the latest methods of risk analysis to the professional who wishes to know how better to manage risk or communicate about it. In order to help readers navigate selectively through the book, each chapter has a succinct preview that summarises its contents. Taken together, these previews offer a conceptual map of the book. Since models of the psychology of risk can sometimes be highly complex and formulated in abstract ways, the book uses illustrations and examples wherever possible to bring to life the significance of the research findings. Boxed information is presented to highlight important or interesting aspects of the arguments and illustrations.

Examination of the research on the psychology of risk proves that we are still very far from understanding all that we need to know about this topic. This book presents much of what is known. In doing so, it becomes only too clear that there are many fascinating questions still to be answered.

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Over the years, I have had many co-researchers who have contributed massively to my understanding of the psychology of risk and I would like to thank them all. Most particularly, I thank Chris Fife-Schaw for his collaboration in the early studies that were transformed by his analytical rigour and organisational abilities. However, I owe my greatest debt of thanks to Julie Barnett, my long-term partner in risk research. Her ability to ask the questions that make you think more deeply is unparalleled.

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