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RISK AND 'THE OTHER'

From earthquakes to epidemics, nuclear to industrial accidents, the mass media continually bring into our daily lives the awareness of risk. But how do people respond to this ever-increasing awareness? How do people cope with living in what has been termed the 'risk society'? This book attempts to explain how, within a given social and cultural context, individuals make sense of impending crisis. In particular, it explains the widespread sense of personal invulnerability when faced with risk: the 'not me' factor. Using a social psychological framework it highlights emotional factors which are a key component of responses to risk that have hitherto been neglected due to the tendency of much psychological work on risk to concentrate almost exclusively on cognitive information processing.

This book will appeal to an international audience of postgraduates, academics and researchers in the areas of risk, psychology, medical anthropology and psychoanalytic studies.

Hélène Joffe is a Lecturer in Psychology at University College London. She has published extensively on risk.

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Preface

The framework which I develop in this book has evolved from my cross-cultural study of responses to AIDS in the first decade of its advent (Joffe, 1996a, 1996b). The findings resonated with a massive amount of work on other risks, across many of the social sciences, which showed that people respond 'not me', 'not my group', 'others are to blame' when initially faced with potential crises. It is crucial to clarify, from the outset, that this response runs alongside other risk-related thoughts and strategies, be they practical actions to avoid being affected, or religious, magical or representational strategies. However, my impetus to write the book stems from a desire to develop an understanding of the 'not me – other' facet of the response to a vast range of imminent dangers. I devote considerable attention to establishing its widespread nature, and to forging a framework with which to explain it.

The book begins with an exposition of the contemporary Western milieu, in which risks form a key aspect of daily experience. A goal of the book is to emphasise the ways in which lay thinkers make sense of what sociologists term the 'risk society'. Existing data concerning human responses to a range of risks are explored. Insights from psychology, anthropology, history and cultural theory are utilised to demonstrate the extensive nature of the 'not me – others' response. These disciplines are drawn upon in order to build up a composite picture of how 'the other' is represented in an ongoing manner by individuals, groups, communities and societies. In particular, the dual dehumanised-desired representation of 'the other', which has subtly permeated thinking across historical periods and cultures, becomes intensified at times of imminent danger. I provide a detailed account of my study of cross-cultural responses to the risk of AIDS in order to demonstrate how individuals protect their identities by holding representations which link potential crises to 'the other' in terms of their own group identity positionings. This not only results in a widespread sense of invulnerability to the risk, but also contributes to a sense of spoiled identity in those group members who are linked with the threat in the dominant representations.

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Evidence from the social sciences indicates that simultaneous to imagining that *others* engineer their own bitter destinies, the majority of people in a society are able to carve a space of invulnerability for themselves. Complementing broader, social scientific inquiries, empirical work on the 'not me' response from the cognitive 'optimistic bias' tradition yields robust findings concerning the 'not me' response to a vast array of health and safety risks. This evidence is advantageous in terms of the concern of the book, since it corroborates data which emerge from the other approaches. However, the explanations offered for 'optimistic bias' reveal the fault lines of purely cognitive theory. Having exposed the problems inherent in conceptualising the individual as a faulty information processor, I suggest pathways for moving beyond this purely cognitive orientation towards the psyche.

The framework which I develop for understanding the 'not me – others' response is infused with emotion, with symbolisation and with a focus on unconscious processes. Psycho-dynamic and social representational tenets are integrated into a distinctive social psychological approach which is able to explain the forces at work when people respond to imminent danger. The role of subjectivity, of symbols and of emotional motivations has been severely underplayed in the contemporary risk literature. I accentuate aspects of the burgeoning literature on the emotions relevant to the response to potential danger in the hope that future work will consolidate this link. The book draws to a close with an examination of the extent to which responses to risks transform over time, followed by exploration of the extent to which the framework forged can be applied across the range of risks.

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