

# Risk and 'the other'

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# 1 Responses to risks: an introduction

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In this book I forge a framework for exploring people's responses to risks including epidemic illnesses, nuclear threats, industrial accidents, wars and hurricanes. The risks which form the focus of the book threaten to strike large numbers of people quite suddenly. However, I show that there is continuity between how these mass threats and the more commonplace risks, such as having a car accident or heart disease, are apprehended.

The human response to such dangers has been explored in disciplines ranging from anthropology to cultural theory, from history to psychology. One common finding arises: people respond 'not me', 'not my group', 'others are to blame' when initially faced with risks. This book examines the link made between risks and 'the other'. It demonstrates that people tend to attain a sense of personal invulnerability to risk by externalising the threat. It also explores the effect of this process on those 'others' who are linked to the potential danger.

The roots of the 'not me – others' phenomenon are viewed differently in each discipline. The social scientific study of people's responses to risk tends to focus on either their narrow cognitive or their broad socio-cultural roots. My approach slots into the gap between these two poles. It explains the subjective experience of risk, connecting this experience to broader social factors. It demonstrates how social forces become sedimented in inner experiences, how the 'we' becomes contained within the 'I'. The challenge is to draw on the rich body of data from the social scientific spectrum, to produce a robust social psychological framework for understanding the human response to potential mass crises.

A thriving post-disaster literature deals with how adversity is processed by individuals. This includes work on post-traumatic stress disorder and on the impact of social support on coping. I do not address these essentially clinical issues, nor the actions taken by people once disasters have struck. I focus on the processes at work when individuals who have not been directly affected by the danger think about the

possibility of being affected, once it has been brought to their attention. Since it is often the mass media that act as the harbinger of these threats, a core element of my framework pertains to the circulation of knowledge about risks between the expert, media and lay realms.

I begin this chapter by drawing on contemporary anthropological and sociological approaches to the human response in the face of risks. This provides the springboard for the social psychological orientation of the book, which focuses on subjective responses to risks while recognising that the individual's response is embroiled in socio-cultural forces. The objective of the book is to advance understanding of how people cope with the plethora of dangers of which they are made aware by messages which emanate from the social environment. I contend that people control the anxiety evoked by danger by forming social representations which alleviate the worry by portraying 'others', rather than the self and the in-group, as the more deserving targets of danger.

### **The risk society**

The impact of risks on society has provided much food for sociological and anthropological thought. In contemporary Western society, risks clamour for people's attention, according to anthropologists (Douglas, 1986, 1990) and sociologists (Beck, 1986/1992; Giddens, 1991). Even though the advancement of technology has supposedly provided a sense of mastery over the natural world, it has spawned an unprecedented *sense* of risk. By having ever increasing levels of expert knowledge about risks relayed to them by the mass media, lay people are constantly surrounded by images and words which bring danger to their awareness.

The mass media play a crucial role in heightening awareness of risks. The media's livelihood depends upon their ability to attract audiences. They can rely on the compelling nature of danger to hold people's attention. In order to make imminent dangers newsworthy, levels of alarm are magnified. Risks are particularly useful for the mass media since they are able to generate news in the absence of an event (Gregory and Miller, 1998). The danger that *might* occur provides the drama, as do the controversies and breakthroughs within the scientific community. The mass media have been dubbed the 'church of change'. Since they favour new events over the more stable elements of the human condition, mass risks provide appealing material for them (Minogue, 1998). Media portrayals raise the spectre of risks by relaying localised disasters, across the globe. Without the mass media many disasters would be known to just those involved, rather than penetrating the consciousness of billions of people the world over.

The perception of being surrounded by myriad threats also relates to the nature of numerous contemporary dangers. Many are not amenable to the senses (Mol and Spaargaren, 1993). Since people cannot rely on sensory information to detect them, risks may lurk anywhere. Only the experts can recognise them. One of the shocking elements of disasters such as Chernobyl, for example, is that the effects of radiation are not obvious. This is also true of the greenhouse effect and acid rain. In a milieu in which people cannot keep in touch with the plethora of recent developments, or have sensations that forewarn them of imminent dangers, experts are called upon to decipher the likelihood and magnitude of the danger. Yet expert judgement is shrouded in doubt. The mass media compel lay people to witness the uncertainty that characterises experts' assessments of risks. The general public has been confronted with uncertainty surrounding links between BSE and CJD (bovine spongiform encephalopathy and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease). Former uncertainties include the link between HIV and AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immune deficiency syndrome), as well as between nuclear fall-out and leukaemia. In addition to being encouraged to witness the disagreements among experts, lay people are made aware that there are human-made risks, such as that from nuclear power, which have spin-offs which surpass the knowhow of the experts who created them. This undermines the trust that can be placed with 'experts'. Their authority is by no means assured.

The combination of a high level of awareness of risk, and a lack of trust in the experts who might be relied upon for protection, creates an era of uncertainty and unease. The 'risk society' (Beck, 1986/1992) or 'risk climate' (Giddens, 1991) that result are extremely anxiety provoking for their members. One of the ways in which contemporary societies have tried to seize control over these circumstances is by making every attempt to calculate and to regulate dangers. Risks are represented as if they are systematically caused, statistically describable and, consequently, somewhat 'predictable' (Douglas, 1990). An attempt is made to 'colonize the future' (Giddens, 1991) by assessing the risks of the various situations that might arise, and putting insurance and surveillance systems into place to prevent future damage from them. The ultimate contemporary example of this is the predictive genetic testing which will become widely available in the West in the near future. This test will examine a sample of an individual's genetic material with the aim of producing information concerning the health-related future of the individual (Davison, 1996). People's genetic blueprint maps their predisposition to certain conditions. However, it does not necessarily determine whether these conditions will occur, and does not determine their timing or severity.

Therefore, the goal of testing is to allow individuals to plan a lifestyle in which they make all of the choices possible to diminish the chance of being affected by those conditions to which they are predisposed. The new genetic findings may have had very different repercussions. The discovery of the genetic bases of illness may have militated against the accentuation of the role of 'healthy choices' in ensuring health. Yet choice and control are stressed due to the profound effects of the ideology of individualism. From the 1970s onward, in both North America and Britain, individuals have been represented as entities who forge their own health-related destinies. Living a long life has been a do-it-yourself proposition (Crawford, 1984). Despite growth in knowledge concerning the predetermined nature of certain illnesses, modern Western societies continue to forge measures to maximise control over any changeable elements of this predisposition.

This is a very different orientation to danger from that which existed in pre-modern times. Although members of societies have always tried to take some form of control over the perils they faced (e.g. by magic), in pre-modern times fate and destiny were relied upon to shape people's futures. Events were experienced not in terms of causal, predictable relations but in terms of cosmic order. The very meaning of the contemporary word for danger – risk – refers to the probability of a (generally) negative outcome, accompanied by the magnitude of the damage which it will do. Danger, on the other hand, merely connotes peril.

By enveloping risks in the language of probability, one swathes the notion of danger in an aura of science (Douglas, 1992). Risk is merely danger dressed in modern clothes. Risk simply means 'danger from future damage',<sup>1</sup> yet the term 'risk' implies precision of calculation, which suggests objectivity and control. The term 'danger', I would argue, also evokes a far more emotive quality. It suggests that a menacing, threatening event is on the horizon. The concept of risk not only conceals the emotional facet of danger, but also obscures the value-laden nature of choices made in societies concerning risks. Risk-reduction policies claim to take their cue from the science of probability (e.g. see Backett *et al.*, 1984).<sup>2</sup> Yet they reveal a more moralistic endeavour, one that routes dangers back to those responsible for them. Douglas points out that well-advertised risks tend to be those connected to moral principles and their legitimisation. The greater accentuation of the danger posed by AIDS, rather than heart disease, since the early 1980s in the West, with the greater connection of AIDS to the morally laden domain, speaks to this point. The reported instances of the two types of illness do not justify this emphasis.

While seeking control over danger, via calculation and regulation, is an aspiration of the experts, Beck's (1996) very definition of the 'risk society' is one in which control is absent: 'The concept describes a phase of development of modern society in which the social, political, ecological and individual risks created by the momentum of innovation increasingly elude the control and protective institutions of industrial society' (Beck, 1996: 27). The notion of risk, by definition, presupposes that a decision can be made regarding how it is possible to avoid a hazard or danger. The incalculable threats of pre-industrial society are turned into calculable risks in industrial society, in line with the modern project of promoting rational control in all spheres of life. However, for Beck, the 'risk society' era follows the industrial phase of society and is different from this preceding form in that the risks – nuclear, chemical, ecological and those resulting from genetic engineering – are of a different order from industrial risks. They cannot be compensated for or insured against because they are not limited in time and space. This quality makes it difficult to hold entities accountable for them. The risks are also apprehended differently in that the public reflects upon them to a far greater degree than in previous times. This reflection produces an unprecedented public scepticism concerning the trust that can be placed in experts.

Despite these allusions to the perspective of the public and its mistrust of experts, Wynne (1996), a sociologist, argues that the risk society thesis has focused, almost exclusively, on expert knowledge. It contains a top-down dynamic. Lay people witness and take their cue from experts. According to Wynne, the notion of a public that constantly responds to and reflects upon expert agendas must be challenged. He contends that sociological work on the risk society has contained a gap in terms of specifying the dynamics of the lay dimension. Even Giddens' (1991) work, which deals with the intimate and interpersonal dimensions of lay knowledge, fails to elucidate the culturally rooted, collective facet. Contrary to these trends, Wynne highlights the way in which lay people forged the agenda of early nuclear issues in Britain. Lay people noticed excessive rates of childhood leukaemia in the vicinity of the Sellafield (formerly Windscale) nuclear reprocessing plant in the 1970s. Experts denied this until such time as the mass media took up the ideas of the lay people. This mass exposure of the problem prompted an official inquiry by the experts; this confirmed the excess of leukaemia which could not be attributed to other causes. The emphasis upon lay people setting the agenda is particularly valuable since it illustrates that lay people generate issues and act on society rather than constantly responding to expert agendas. Nevertheless, to refer to the process of



the circulation of ideas in a society as being either top-down or bottom-up reflects an oversimplification. Even Wynne's characterisation of lay people identifying excessive leukaemia cases at Sellafield implicitly includes medical expertise, since it is medics who must have taken part in the identification of the individual cases of leukaemia. In order to capture the complexity of these dynamics, there is a need for a theory of the fluid interaction between lay and expert responses to risks. Some of the other issues raised by Wynne highlight further important aspects that an appropriate theory of the lay response to risk must encapsulate.

Wynne (1995) emphasises the need to reconstrue the 'public' as a plural entity: there are many 'publics' who apprehend the risks and they do so in line with issues of identity. In order to demonstrate how identity enters into the apprehension of risks, Wynne refers to the case of radiation workers at Sellafield who chose to maintain high levels of ignorance in relation to radiation risks because they did not want to threaten existing social arrangements in which certain experts were assigned the role of understanding the science of radiation and of thereby protecting the workers. A division of labour, as well as trust and dependency, were key features of the workers' responses to radiation risks. Wynne uses this case to support the notion that identity processes lie at the heart of people's responses to potential risks. While his work is useful in that it demonstrates that the broad brushstroke 'risk society' approach needs to consider the dynamic interaction of those with different roles in institutions, his approach is not infused by a theoretically driven understanding of the processes at work in identity construction. A focus on role allocation and the emotional dynamics of trust and dependency does not fully encompass or explain how people construct their orientation towards risks. In addition, the focus on the workers as a group irons out variability in their responses which may relate to their individual biographies, and to their group identities outside of the workplace. Insight into such factors provides knowledge of the workings of identity formation, as the theoretical position which I advocate will indicate.

Finally, another valuable debate which Wynne (1982) sets up is that between the advancement of rational rather than more symbolic and emotive responses to risks. He claims that within policy-making and within sociological work, emotional and symbolic facets are neglected. In relation to nuclear power, for example, its proponents have demanded that public debates evaluate the 'hard facts' alone, without reference to other realms. Yet for lay people, nuclear power is a highly emotive issue, one upon which the whole future of civilisation may rest. It carries a vast array of symbols, including that of scientific and

technological hubris and of environmental destruction. Nuclear fall-out has also been associated with the destruction of people's health in the areas that surround nuclear plants. Again, while Wynne's work suggests exemplary avenues for exploration, coherent theory which allows for the development of these valuable angles, has not yet been developed within sociology.

### **A framework for understanding the individual's response to risks**

Utilising the social psychological theory of social representations, in conjunction with certain psycho-dynamic ideas, the hiatus left by the various sociological positions concerning the nature of lay knowledge can be addressed. In the framework which I forge, the concern is with the culturally rooted, collective nature of the public knowledge of risks, as well as with the emotive and symbolic dimensions. My primary contention is that the personal shock evoked by mass risks sends people along a defensive pathway of representation. The 'risk society' does not necessarily leave people with a heightened state of anxiety, as Beck's and Giddens' work may suggest. Nor do humans rely exclusively upon surveillance and insurance systems to control this anxiety, to 'colonize the future'. Humans possess defensive mechanisms which protect them from unwelcome emotion. These defences are reflected in their representations of risks, which serve to control the anxiety evoked by the danger. The social psychological framework which I forge has the potential to strengthen the existing sociological ideas, allowing for reconciliation of the split between the more socially based dynamics and the more intimate, interpersonal levels of the response to risk.

Work on the subjective experience of risk in the context of the 'risk society' is surprisingly limited. Risk-related perceptions have been studied extensively in cognitive psychology without reference to the social environment. The psychological theory of 'optimistic bias' points to conclusive findings concerning how people interpret knowledge about risks. Most people imagine that they are less likely than their peers to be affected by a large array of risks. This area of research centres upon how people evaluate their own risk in comparison to how at risk they imagine others to be. People are found to be unrealistically optimistic in relation to their own susceptibility to dangers. Another area of cognitive psychology, that of judgement- and decision-making, evaluates the odds which people offer, in relation to their chances of becoming affected by a particular risk. The probabilities offered by lay people are often compared to scientific estimates, and the source of the errors made by

lay people are explored. Both of these models focus on information processing problems which lead to the 'faults' observed. By positing purely cognitive origins to individuals' reactions to danger, they negate the role played by societal forces and are seldom drawn upon in social scientific debates about risk. While it is unsatisfactory to restrict a theory of the responses to risks to the cognitive realm, findings from this realm corroborate the 'not me – others' process which many social scientists identify in relation to imminent danger. This need not result from people being error-prone information processors. I explore the meanings which people make of risks. This inquiry provides evidence that both socio-cultural and emotional factors enter into the process of evaluating and experiencing risks. Rather than focusing on the disparity between lay and expert risk assessment, I examine the ways in which people prioritise protection of the self and in-group from threat over rational, objective assessments of danger.

*The 'individual': on subjectivity*

My concern is with what happens in the internal world of the individual who is faced with the threat of being affected by a disaster. An accusation of methodological individualism can be levelled at an approach which focuses on individual responses to mass risks. However, the point is that one can talk of individuals without individualising, without locating the origin of experience within the individual psyche. Processes that lie beyond the individual, and often beyond human awareness, play a key role in forging the individual's response to risks. A refrain throughout this book will be that social forces are embodied within the self: the 'we' is sedimented in the 'I'. The core theories on which the book draws – social representations theory and contemporary psychoanalysis – are integrated to explain this process.

My overall orientation is in keeping with the direction in which Henriques *et al.* (1984/1998) tried to propel psychology in the 1980s. They called for a focus on subjective experience, yet construed subjectivity as an entity shaped by social forces. It has not been taken up by many psychologists (see Billig, 1997 and Frosh, 1989a for notable exceptions), since the discursive model, which has catapulted to the forefront of social psychology, is not centrally concerned with subjective experience. Postmodern variants of discursive theory go as far as to eschew the notion of subjectivity completely. Michael (1994: 397) claims that 'there is no self'. According to this line of thought, those people who live in the West, under the influence of factors such as the electronic media, are postmodern beings. This type of being takes up

many different subject positions. Rather than being a coherent entity, the 'self' is 'nomadic'. It moves between different perspectives and identities. Henriques *et al.* (1998) question this perspective succinctly and insightfully:

in this view the subject is composed of, or exists as, a set of multiple and contradictory positionings or subjectivities. But how are such fragments held together? Are we to assume . . . that the individual subject is simply the sum total of all positions in discourses since birth? If this is the case, what accounts for the continuity of the subject, and the subjective experience of identity? What accounts for the predictability of people's actions, as they repeatedly position themselves within particular discourses? Can people's wishes and desires be encompassed in an account of discursive relations? (Henriques *et al.*, 1998: 204).

These authors advocate a more unified subjectivity than that put forward in the postmodern stance. I adhere to the notion of a self that has a fairly stable sense of its position, and of internal, relatively consistent desires and wishes. The framework developed in this book is conceived as a late modern rather than as a postmodern enterprise. Both of the key theories upon which my approach draws are more modern than they are postmodern.

#### *Why social representations theory?*

The social representations framework, established by the social psychologist Serge Moscovici, provides a composite vision of the development of common-sense thinking. While sociologists such as Wynne suggest useful alleys regarding lay apprehension of risks, a unified theoretical position on lay thought emerges from the more psychologically rooted perspective. Social representations theory highlights and seeks to understand people's spontaneous philosophies about new societal events. The concern is with how different groups make meaning of events such as a newly identified epidemic or the threat of nuclear war. There is particular emphasis upon how lay theories come about and operate. The emphasis is wholly different from one which seeks to identify the faults made by lay thinkers in understanding risky situations, with the hope of rectifying mistaken thinking. This has been a dominant concern not only in cognitive psychology but also in the Public Understanding of Science (PUS) field. The PUS field's research agenda is centrally concerned with the measurement, explanation and finding of remedies for 'misunderstandings' of science and technology (Wynne, 1995). The approach assumes that the motivations for 'understanding' science are the same across experts and lay people. Primarily, the

acquisition of 'objective knowledge', pertaining to the 'true facts', is imagined to be a common goal.

However, social representations theory proposes that the motivations which underpin 'risk perception' are not based upon a need for accurate information. Rather, people are motivated to represent the risks which they face in a way that protects them, and the groups with which they identify, from threat. They make meaning of the threat in line with self-protective motivations rather than with rational dictums. Social representations theory also emphasises communication, rather than internal information processing, when explaining how people set up their representations. It stresses the role of group affinities, rather than lone information processing, in shaping ideas. In the dialogue that goes on in pubs, on buses and around dinner tables, people shape their ideas about newly encountered threats in a way which fits with the ideas held by the groups with which they affiliate.<sup>3</sup>

Social representations theory is a social constructionist theory concerned with the specific forces at work in shaping understandings of new phenomena. It posits that the seeds of the representations of new phenomena which people create tend to lie in scientific interpretations, which get relayed from this reified, expert universe to the lay domain by the mass media. Therefore, the mass media play a critical role in feeding the dialogues between lay people, which establish their social representations. Initially experts, journalists and lay thinkers alike use old, familiar ideas in order to understand unfamiliar threats. They also draw upon the images and metaphors which circulate in the culture. By stamping new threats with the ideas associated with past dangers, the threat posed by the new, mysterious hazard is muffled. Assimilation in line with existing images and metaphors has a similar effect. The new event is absorbed in a way that reduces the fear which surrounds it, thereby protecting the sense of safety of the representor.

Unlike most discourse analysis, which is the more prevalent version of social constructionism in social psychology, social representations theory delves into the symbolisation inherent in a variety of representational genres. It does not elevate textual discourse over images and rituals, in order to explain how meaning is given to new events. The theory is also distinctive in comparison with discourse analysis in that it places great emphasis upon the specific group-based processes which are at work when individuals think about risks. Primarily, the group identifications of the individual shape which ideas are taken up from history and from the prevailing culture. When new risks are encountered, individuals draw on ideas and ways of thinking that originate within the groups with which they identify (Halbwachs, 1950; Mos-

covici, 1961/1976). Therefore risks evoke various group-linked responses within individuals.

This patterning also distinguishes social representations theory from postmodernist theorisation as a whole, which tends to accentuate the very diversity and fragmentation of human discourses. There is a degree of sharedness and coherence in the social representations held by members of naturally occurring social groups. The representations are unified by the common motivation to protect the in-group and self-identity via the representation. I have stated that unlike many social constructionist theories, social representations theory does not eschew the notion of subjectivity. Therefore psycho-dynamic theorisation can be drawn into the heart of the theory to allow for understanding of the interaction between the inner and outer worlds of the individual faced with a mass crisis.

### *Why psycho-dynamic theory?*

Psycho-dynamic theory facilitates understanding of the roots of the social representations of risks which link danger with 'the other'. Anxiety, and the defence against it, are the key foci. My chosen psycho-dynamic outlook, drawn primarily from strands of object relations and Freudian theory, suggests pathways for synthesis of psychic and social processes. The object relations tradition is distinctive in that it posits that social forces lie at the root of the formation of mental life. People's mental lives are launched within *relationships* with primary caregivers. Representational life emerges from these early relationships. The unconscious representational structures which infants form there construct the bases of subsequent patterns of thought. Early representations tend to be orientated towards protection of the self from anxiety. In order to accomplish this, 'the other' becomes the repository of all that the infant seeks to push out from its own space for the purpose of protection. These early building blocks of what is to be associated with the self, versus with others, leave their mark on the developing individual. Political and social ideas acquired in the course of the lifespan augment the individual's notion of what can comfortably be associated with self and in-group, and what is unacceptable and must be flung out beyond their walls. Individuals learn which qualities and actions are acceptable from the norms of the societies in which they live. At times of potential threat, when levels of anxiety are particularly high, the early mechanism of defence reappears, and the 'other' becomes the target of a rich array of projections which contain those aspects of experience from which individuals seek to distance their selves.

This focus on mental life, on subjectivity, stands in contrast to broad brushstroke theories of risk-related thinking, such as some of the sociological and anthropological ideas mentioned above, which emphasise sweeping societal responses to risk, without taking heed of the individuals who generate these responses. Even when lay thinking is taken into account, 'lay people' tend to be viewed as interest groups with various roles to carry out in the running of an institution or society. The psycho-dynamic focus on mental life also stands in stark contrast to the postmodern position in which there is certainly no coherent psychic space beneath the individual's veneer. Having denied the existence of the psychic core, it cannot be deemed a determining force in people's thoughts and actions.

Concern with individual subjectivity, with its roots in the unconscious, is rare within contemporary psychology, not least because of the dominance of the cognitive paradigm. Heider (1958), whose esteemed work is a cornerstone of the social cognition tradition, originally introduced the cognitive approach by stating: 'Our concern will be with "surface" matters, the events that occur in everyday life on a conscious level, rather than with unconscious processes studied by psychoanalysis in "depth" psychology. These intuitively understood and "obvious" human relations can, as we shall see, be just as challenging and psychologically significant as the deeper and stranger phenomena' (Heider 1958: 1). Interestingly, when he wrote this, Heider had to defend cognitive processes, emphasising their equal significance to unconscious processes. By the late 1990s, the scales had tipped in the opposite direction. The deeper, stranger phenomena are hardly given a mention in esteemed British and American psychology departments, other than to give students a flavour of a dim and distant past. In becoming interested in the surface, psychology has neglected the depths.

This has had serious consequences. The shift towards focusing on the conscious mind has distanced psychology from the study of emotional motivation and desire. Increasingly the emotions, once more, have become objects of study. Yet it is the biological, neurological, cognitive and discursive nature of the emotions that has been accentuated. The unconscious, subjective aspects of emotion, for the most part, have not been revisited. The framework which I develop revitalises this area. By taking heed of the new emotions literature, in both psychology and sociology, I endeavour to identify aspects which are relevant to the sense of invulnerability which arises at times of imminent crisis.

*Quality checks*

How can one check the quality of a framework, such as the one which I forge for studying human responses to risks? The power of any framework rests in the interpretation it allows (Silverman, 1993). Is it credible? Is it plausible? Is it robust? Does it incorporate the possibility of revision? Does it expand current thinking? Does it resonate with evidence found across a number of disciplines, and with data gleaned from various methodological standpoints? Ideally, if the framework contains considerable value and rigour, all of these questions should be answered in the affirmative. My exploration of evidence for the 'not me – others' phenomenon across a range of disciplines and methods, over subsequent chapters, is an attempt to convince the reader that the core phenomenon exists.<sup>4</sup> Of course those positioned in the different social sciences will be interested in different aspects of it, will want to check its validity by way of different methods and will have provisors in relation to the pervasiveness of the phenomenon. I want to reiterate that I am not making a claim for the 'not me – other' phenomenon being the sole response to imminent danger. It exists alongside other responses. Yet it is crucial, not least because the sense of invulnerability to the crisis which it promotes can stop people from taking appropriate actions in relation to the risks, and can set up self-blame and a spoiled sense of identity in members of groups designated as 'other' by the majority.

The useful 'depth'/'surface' division made by Heider (1958) points to the variable objects of study in psychology. Since science has variable objects, it also requires variable methods. Since I explore the meaning made of risks, with its unconscious and symbolic dimensions, the use of methods devised solely from observation of the conscious minds of individuals is inappropriate. I learn about the object of study – individuals' responses to risks – in a manner which befits this object. While taking into account data from a number of theoretical and empirical sources, I advocate depth interviewing of lay people, together with content analysis of the messages which exist in their social environments. This grants the researcher a sense of the meaning made of the risks. Analysis is theoretically driven, but is grounded in the pathways which lay thinkers follow in their interviews. The aim is to forge a framework that encompasses and explains the various facets of the 'not me – others' phenomenon that exists in relation to many risks.



### **Orientation of the book: resting between two poles**

My framework fits into the space between the cognitive and socio-cultural poles of the spectrum of risk research. In the cognitive approach, which dominates the psychology of risk, lay people are presumed to face potential dangers rationally, yet to make cognitive errors due to the limitations of their information processing skills. Allusions to emotional states are oblique. The menace is removed from danger. It may be argued that prominent sociological works have approached risk with a similar orientation. Wynne (1996) criticises fellow sociologists Giddens and Beck for their rational, cognitivist reading of risk. Sociologists, with notable exceptions, have tended to focus on the 'risk society' as a monolithic environment, one in which all citizens are subject to raised levels of anxiety. This stance fails to explore how lay people imbibe knowledge of risks.

My concern is with the experience of the individual member of society, who must face a risk. Work which attempts to take both the socio-historical and individual experience of risk into account simultaneously is uncommon, though the insightful work of Gilman (1985a, 1988), a cultural historian, most closely approximates this position. He develops a theory of a widespread process that occurs in the West when people's levels of fear are raised, by imminent threats. Much of his work is located within the mental and physical health sphere. Gilman's focus is upon how Western images of disease are connected with a fear of collapse.<sup>5</sup> Yet people do not hold onto this fear. Rather, they externalise it. Once located outside of the self the fear is removed and it is the 'other', rather than the self, who faces catastrophe. Within his theory, the issue of control is central. Faced with having to interpret events such as epidemics, Westerners project a fear of loss of control onto 'others' who then become imbued with a tendency towards excess, such as excessive lasciviousness, which is felt to be absent within the self. The 'other' chosen as the target of projection is one who has already shown vulnerability to having collapsed. Gilman's model can be extended beyond the health sphere. It explains how responsibility for threats becomes displaced onto 'the other' who is then pathologised. By projecting the unwelcome links to the threat, the self is left pure, free from associations with the threat.

While Gilman's ideas have been a source of inspiration for me, they are different from my own in certain key respects. Firstly, my analysis points to the symmetry inherent in Western and non-Western responses to threat. Gilman's writing tends to focus on the projection of unwanted parts of the self in Western thinking.<sup>6</sup> I argue that even though the

content of the representations is different, there is evidence of a 'not me – other' mechanism underlying responses in both contexts.

Secondly, Gilman's use of object relations theory is more circumscribed than my own since he draws on just one aspect: the splitting defence mechanism which originates in the first stage of the infant's life, with the attendant projective process. The aspect which he chooses, and then links in to the notion of stereotype, leads him to a more fixed theory of the response to crises. Further aspects of object relations theory indicate why representations of risk need not be of the 'not me – other' variety since later developments in the infant's representational system allow for a more complex, non-'stereotyped' apprehension of events. I explore the mechanism which facilitates this in the final chapter of the book.

Thirdly, Gilman's key focus is upon how the dynamics of the response to threat play out in images, be they artistic, those from medical textbooks or in public health campaigns. Gilman does not enter the world-views of lay thinkers directly. Arguably, these are more dynamic and changeable than the cultural artefacts upon which he bases his theory. However, both his approach, and the social representations approach to which I adhere, stress that the past stamps its mark on new representations of risks, but that representations also change over time. At times of crisis historical images are brought forward into the present, but they also get reshaped by contemporary currents.<sup>7</sup>

The work of Crawford (1994) is also complementary to my own in that it reconciles the individual and socio-cultural facets of responses to risk. Crawford's key concern is with the health sphere and with the ideologies that constitute health in the United States. He draws heavily upon the work of Gilman, and points to the relevance, for representations of health, of the bifurcation set up between the healthy, controlled self, and 'the other', who is the repository for connotations of out-of-control facets and can therefore be blamed for its own demise. He shows, convincingly, how this split is part of the identity work of North Americans. It leaves them with feelings of being protected. Unlike my own approach, he does not study the dynamic interaction between different group-based representations, such as that between groups accused of out-of-control behaviour and the dominant groups. I aim to demonstrate that such interactions are crucial for 'identity work'. Neither Crawford nor Gilman unpick the dynamic process of representation in a culture: the way in which people from differing groups take up risks brought to their attention via various forms of communication. The imagery explored by Gilman (1985a, 1985b) is a crucial aspect of representation, but we cannot know how humans read the images unless

we invite them to tell us. Social representations theory makes a distinctive contribution to the theory of the circulation of new threats in a society by encompassing lay, media and scientific representations, and highlighting the 'identity work' accomplished by the process of representation.

### Concluding remarks

The 'risk society' hypothesis proposes that contemporary, Western societies raise people's levels of anxieties by presenting them with litanies of risks over which experts have little control. The best known sociological writings on risk emphasise the *insurance and surveillance systems* that are put into place as a mechanism of exercising control over the future. Esteemed anthropological texts accentuate how control is sought by *calculation and regulation* of danger. My social psychological stance accentuates the seeking out of control via *representation*. When a defensive prism has been established, anxiety is not raised by even a barrage of dangers. I integrate strands of social representations and psycho-dynamic theory to forge a framework for understanding social representations of risks which leave people with a strong sense of invulnerability.

'Natural' and technological disasters continue to increase in both frequency and severity (Oliver-Smith, 1996). Disasters form an ongoing backdrop to human existence. The Red Cross's annual list of the world's worst non-conflict disasters in the past few years includes meningitis, cholera and malaria epidemics, as well as typhoons, floods, cyclones and storms. Earthquakes, volcanoes and hurricanes have also loomed large. Such disasters affect millions of people. Each phase in history throws up a plethora of disasters. The rapid increase in population size, use of advanced technology and increased air-travel have all contributed to the massive scale of contemporary disasters at a material level. In addition, the mass mediation of local disasters globally has contributed to the sense of being surrounded by a plethora of mass crises. In line with the Western desire to seize control, these factors prompted the United Nations to declare the 1990s the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

It is timely to draw together common threads in the analysis of responses to risk across the social sciences. Material vulnerability to different types of disasters depends upon multiple factors including social, political and economic structures (Porto and Defreitas, 1996). However, my key concern is with a framework for understanding how thinking processes operate in the face of this vulnerability. Wynne

(1996) favours transferring the focus from the 'real' nature of risk – which he construes as the focus in the accounts of Beck and Giddens – to the cultural and social dimensions that surround risk. I support this orientation: material circumstances pose risks, but it is the expert and lay conceptions of these circumstances that constitute what is understood to be threatening. It is for this reason that I dwell on neither the 'real' threat posed, nor the 'biased' or 'unrealistic' thinking which arises, in relation to such threats. Rather, the focus is upon meanings made of what come to be represented as material threats. The challenge is to find patterns of psychic response common to all risks, with an eye to how changes in these responses may come about.

#### NOTES

- 1 The terms potential disaster, potential crisis, imminent danger and risk are used interchangeably in this book, since risk is defined as 'danger from future damage' (Douglas, 1992).
- 2 This World Health Organisation position paper on health risks states that when communities decide which risks to focus on, statistical issues must be considered: common problems must be given more priority than more rare problems, problems with more serious outcomes must be given more priority than those with less serious outcomes, easily preventable problems must be given priority over those more difficult to prevent, and those with frequency increasing must be given more priority than those with static or declining frequencies.
- 3 The focus of the book is on early reactions to potential dangers which come to the person's awareness, often via the mass media or people discussing the content of the mass media. Therefore, I do not discuss the effects of personal experiences of the threat, or personal contact with those who have already been affected.
- 4 I utilise the 'not me – others' concept as a shorthand for the set of concepts: 'not me', 'not my group', 'others are to blame'.
- 5 Within much of the health literature 'illness' refers to the physical and mental states which are deemed pathological in Western culture, whereas 'disease' refers to the social construction which provides a framework within which to understand illness. I generally use the term illness, but since I attempt to reconcile the material and social constructionist bases of risks (see chapter 2), this encompasses both facets.
- 6 Gilman does not see this as exclusively a Western attribute but tends to focus on the West. Crawford (1994) assumes that Gilman sees projection of vulnerability onto others as a universal, human process.
- 7 One example of this, offered by Gilman (1985b), is that the image of the diseased person as ugly has been challenged in contemporary AIDS campaigns which generally depict erotic images. This relates, among other forces, to the opposition, by the gay pride movement of the 1960s, to images of the 'pathologised homosexual'.