Gender Talking Risk: Discourse, Epistemic Subjectivity and Threat.

A longstanding quantitative finding from many surveys of public perceptions of hazardous technologies is that women respondents typically report significantly higher levels of concern about environmental and technological hazards than do men. Such survey-based research can be rightly critiqued for essentializing concepts such as ‘gender’. Equally, despite a number of useful review papers written from a sociological perspective, much of the literature fails to offer adequately grounded theoretical explanations for the observed empirical finding on gender and risk.

Drawing upon contemporary gender studies, social psychology, and science and technology studies concepts, we report findings from a secondary qualitative analysis of an existing focus group data set (total = 12 group sessions) of women and men talking about risk, technology and science issues (including topics such as agricultural biotechnology, climate change, radioactive waste and human genetic testing). We conclude by presenting a theoretical synthesis, arguing that it may indeed not be gender per se which can account for the observed survey findings. Rather, differences in the men and women’s talk may be related to the complex production of discourses about technology and risk and through this participants’ positioning in the groups as they compete for and/or claim positions as ‘epistemic subjects’. Implications for theory and further research on gender and risk are also discussed.