Young People, Risk Taking and Risk Making: Perspectives for Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Policy makers, professionals and public have become increasingly concerned with identifying, sustaining and containing young people who are not only troubled but troubling, not just at risk but risky. Social work, however, has been relatively silent on the subject. In social work practice, young people have become largely 'someone else’s problem'; in the academy, relatively little critical attention has been given to young people’s risk taking, or to the way we ‘make’ or construct it. This paper aims to open up the debate. It takes an unashamedly exploratory journey across a range of discursive terrains rather than offering a systematic map or review all that lies therein. Examining current concerns with and responses to youth and risk, it explores some of the social and psychological theory bases whereby youth is constructed as a risky business. Drawing on empirical research from a range of disciplines, it examines patterns and dynamics of young people’s risk taking, and uses concepts of cultural learning, social and identity capital, and habitus to frame these. The discussion highlights the need for critically reflexive social work, to understand the complex interplay of identity and agency, context and structure that underpins young people’s risk taking. It encourages us too to scrutinise our judgements of what is acceptable riskiness and what unacceptable, what within and what beyond the pale.

Young people and risk: locating the problem

The idea of youth at risk has become central to a range of discourses, academic and professional. In the regional and global contexts of significant social, economic and technical change, narratives of risk and uncertainty are widespread (Beck et al, 1994; Beck, 1999; Giddens, 1999), while in personal social services, the language of risk, its calculation and accountability, has largely superseded the language of welfare and need (Lupton, 1999). Young people, meanwhile, are seen both as a treasured resource and as endangered and dangerous - at risk from others, to themselves, and to the fabric of communities (Kelly, 2000a&b, 2003). The category of ‘youth at risk’, and the imperatives to protect, monitor, contain and sustain young people in the transition to responsible adulthood, have come to the fore on multiple intellectual and professional agendas.

Politicians and policy makers are increasingly exercised by how to prevent young people from taking or being exposed to risk, from becoming socially excluded, deviant, unhealthy or unproductive (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, 2000a&b; Home Office, 2003; Office of National Statistics, 2004). However, in social policy and social work there are some noteworthy ambivalences and gaps in the way that the question of young people and risk is currently framed.
Meanwhile academic social work discourse is surprisingly quiet on the topic. A brief tour of national and international social work journals reveals that while much research and theoretical attention is paid to young children’s development in general, their needs and risks faced, there is a dearth of work dedicated specifically to young people as a category, let alone to youth and risk. Where they appear, they do so only in the shape of discrete sub-groups, presenting distinct problems, for targeted concern. On the ‘welfare’ side of the care/control divide, we see care leavers, teenage parents, young homeless, addicts or those with mental health problems, considered as discrete populations of youth at risk (Bunting and McAuley, 2000a&b; Davis et al, 2002; Stead et al, 2004; Stevens, 2004). Slightly more prominent, perhaps, have been those on the ‘control’ side of the divide – young people increasingly highlighted in policy as troublesome rather than troubled, at risk of offending or simply being offensive (Goldson, 2000a, 2002; Smith, D. 2003; Smith, R. 2003; Whyte, 2004).

Striking, however, in its absence from academic social work is a wider discourse on the status of risk in young people’s lives, our understanding and response to it. This in a context where popular, professional and policy wisdoms denote adolescence and youth as a period of ‘storm and stress’, when individuals are more than ever likely to become risky to themselves and others.

From this discursive absence stem two further observations. Firstly, what is difficult to discern from the literature are the understandings that currently guide social work practice with young people and risk. Perhaps it is simply naïve to search for these now? The most cursory conversation with practitioners about social work with young people in the UK context raises eyebrows either in puzzlement or resignation. In climates of resource restriction and narrowing of the social work role within the wider preventive agenda, mainstream social work practice with young people is a luxury rarely afforded (Department of Health, 1996). More and more, responsibility for young people ‘belongs’ to other agencies, public, voluntary, independent or community sector, a shift no doubt accentuated by the growing separation of children’s from adult services, with young people falling (in)conveniently between. On top comes the implicit sliding scale of professional blame culture, with culpability for child protection failures judged even more heinous for younger children than older, thus the former, of necessity, prioritised. That it may be naïve to search now for the research and theory bases of social work with young people may be true. But this is no argument for ignoring the case for social work with young people at risk, nor indeed for ignoring research and theoretical insights to inform it.

A second observation is that nationally and internationally there is a wealth of research and theoretical discussion about young people and risk, taking place within a range of disciplines under the broad, if multi-coloured, umbrella of youth studies. Despite their heterogeneity, most commentators share a vision of young people as a risky population, either by definition, or by virtue of the contemporary world they live in. Academic social work debate has taken little of this on board. This paper aims to make a start.
In doing so, several challenges are faced. The first is simply defining the terms of youth and risk for consideration. Clearly, it makes sense to distinguish in the detail between 13 and 20 year-olds. To open the broader debate, however, it is helpful to consider research and theory that concerns all those from early teens to twenty. As for risk, the focus here will be on risk taking as opposed to risk exposure, acknowledging that that the two are in multiple ways connected. Here too it is important to distinguish in the detail between, for example, practising unsafe sex, school exclusion, alcohol abuse or criminality. To begin the debate, however, young people and risk taking merit consideration in the round.

More challenging is the task of making connections between the very different empirical and theoretical discursive strands within youth and risk studies, all too often either tangled or passing each other by (Cohen and Ainley, 2000; France, 2000; Kelly, 2000b). Psychology, social theory, sociology, medicinal science, criminology, educational and cultural studies have brought to the field different objects and processes of enquiry, different knowledges, different truths. This paper marks a start not an end to teasing from this web some coherent and constructive threads for social work to follow.

The discussion looks first at current concerns with, and responses to, young people and risk, focusing on the British context. Turning then to the wider national and international literature, it explores some of the theoretical bases on which youth is constructed as a risky business, examining, as the title of the paper suggests, both risk taking, and risk making. The former focuses on questions of agency, structure and identity. The latter reflects critically on the ways in which young people, and youth itself, have become constituted as risky. Finally, the discussion turns to specific research and theoretical developments that might inform social work understanding and practice.

Young people behaving badly? Public perceptions, policy responses

‘Today’s youth: anxious, depressed, anti-social’ – so went a UK broadsheet headline in 2004, adding fuel if fuel were needed to public and professional anxieties that young people are more disturbed and disturbing now than ever (Guardian Newspaper, 13 September, 2004). Historically, public discourses have used young people as a barometer of social ills, with whatever threats they appear to pose taken as indicators of society’s moral decline (Brannen et al, 1994). Currently, this seems more than ever so, with mounting evidence marshalled, feeding public anxiety and neo-liberal policy reaction (Cote, 2002).

It is not difficult to rehearse the catalogue of indictors available in the UK to support this case; Coleman and Hendry (2003) have provided a well-documented digest of concerns. Mental health problems, commonly with adolescent onset, have reached worrying levels; suicidal behaviour and self harm particularly so. Far too many young people, especially females, smoke. Levels of alcohol consumption and binge drinking are among the worst in Europe, as is young people’s use of illicit drugs. Sexual activity starts
increasingly early, with the most vulnerable practising unsafe sex. STD and HIV rates are higher than ever, teenage conceptions and abortions among the highest in Europe. School exclusions are hugely on the increase, and anti-social behaviour in all its forms perceived as a growing blight. Official youth crime rates have soared since 1950 with self-reported offending even higher. Neither our youngsters’ own futures, nor the society they will constitute, look a pretty sight.

There is, of course, an alternative story to be told. Drawing again on Coleman and Schofield (2003), we may marshal the countervailing evidence to question not necessarily whether the ‘problem’ exists, but how it becomes inflated, stereotyped, to the point of moral panic. Drug use, for example, is mostly short term, experimental, and ‘soft’. Teenage conception rates (albeit high) have decreased steadily over the last five years; the deficit model commonly applied to teenage parenthood has also been challenged (Lee et al, 2004). Meanwhile, young people are staying longer in education/training, with a corresponding reduction in unemployment. Most striking of all, official youth crime trends have actually moved downwards over the last decade, with young people more likely than others to be the victims, rather than perpetrators, of crime (Goldson, 2002). And in the broadest sense of all, we are faced with the anomaly that risk taking, or ‘edgework’, is often applauded for adults, but rarely for young people (Plant and Plant, 1992; Lupton, 1999). There is a clear case for questioning why young people are so pervasively regarded, even demonised, as risky.

A preliminary step is to locate current public and policy responses to young people and risk within contemporary neo-liberal discourses. Here residual principles of welfarism remain, but conditionally so, and in tension with the revived distinction between deserving and undeserving. Self-regulation is posited as the route to social inclusion (Lupton, 1999; Forsythe and Jordan, 2002; Garrett, 2003a,b). As for social work, its raison d’être now the identification, assessment and management of risk, the professional role has become replete with contradictions. Struggling to uphold traditions of support and empowerment for the vulnerable, its role has become primarily disciplinary, ‘tough love’ promoting normative self-regulation where possible, co-ercion where not (Jordan, 2004). Notable expressions of this can be seen in child and family social work, embedded in the Assessment Framework, and in the shades of ‘big brother’ lurking behind parenting orders, Information Sharing and Assessment, ID cards and the like (Garrett, 2003a, 2004). Noteworthy too has been a terminological shift expressed in ‘Every Child Matters’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and the Children Bill 2004. The overarching designation of children and young people ‘at risk’ has come to embrace not just those in some way at risk of significant harm, but also those in danger of presenting risk to others, or to ‘preferred futures’. Within the risk rhetoric, there has effectively been an elision between the agendas of care and control. In the case of young people, it has been argued, concerns with the former have been significantly subsumed, even hijacked, by the latter (Goldson, 2000a, 2002).
A brief look at the raft of recent policy developments focusing on young people in England and Wales confirms both the blurring of the concept of risk, and the devolution of responsibility for its prevention and management away from social work. At national and local levels, policy initiatives have become polarised between those primarily preventive of social exclusion, and those coercive, for youngsters risky to the rest of us. Into both categories may fall those who engage in one way or another risky behaviour, but the distinction between those deserving support and those warranting correction is never explicit. Either way, with the possible exception of care leavers, they are primarily not the problem of social work.

On the side of reducing risk of social exclusion we have seen numerous governmental strategies and schemes, in all sectors, targeted at children and young people, aiming among other things to reduce poverty, improve environments, promote participation. We have Education Action Zones, and increased vocational training opportunities. We have multi-agency Health Action Zones, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, and, at last, a National Service Framework for those with health or mental health problems. For those at risk of offending we have preventive schemes such as On Track; for those further along the slippery slope, Youth Offending Teams. For sex education, pregnant or parent teenagers, we have a wide range initiatives promoted by the Social Exclusion Unit, the Teenage Pregnancy Unit and others. Connexions is now the service to which young people are expected to turn not only for support in progressing from education to work, but with personal problems too. The ‘joined-upness’ and success of these initiatives is much disputed (Goldson, 2002; Department for Work and Pensions, 2004), but it is safe to say that significant gaps remain apparent. The dearth of services for young people with mental health problems, for example, has been well publicised (Young Minds, 2004); a 2004 Department for Education and Skills survey demonstrated that young people may indeed turn to Connexions with educational/vocational issues, but rarely with other problems (DfES, 2004). Once upon a time, these might have been for social work. Finally, those young people who have crossed the bureaucratic boundary (at eighteen) between childhood and adulthood, must for the most part take their chances along with everyone else in the world of adult services.

Beyond this, we come to young people somehow defined as risky not just to themselves, but to ‘us’. Paradoxically, these may now be embraced within the rhetorical category of ‘at risk’, but they or their parents are increasingly designated worthy not of support but surveillance, control, punishment. It is no surprise that those at risk of offending were given their own policy paper (Home Office, 2003) alongside, but separate from, Every Child Matters. Certainly, there are preventive and restorative components of policy and practice emerging from recent youth justice legislation (Smith, D, 2003). However more striking has been the shift in emphasis from ‘youth justice’ to ‘youth offending’, the slide away from mainstream social work intervention, and the thrust towards punitive regulation, itself potentially criminalizing (Goldson, 2002; Smith, R., 2003; Whyte, 2004). For those over 18 years (adults) the thrust of policy in reality tougher on crime than the causes of crime, is yet more apparent. As for young people’s risk taking, whether it
merits care or control, neither seems much the business of social work any more. To begin to redress the balance, we need to look first at the bases in psychological and social theory upon which youth and risk are configured.

Constructing youth as a risky business

While the conventional ascription of turbulence to the transitional state of youth is a matter of some dispute (Coleman and Hendry, 1999) most commentators agree that this is a period in which major transitions are to be negotiated, both in the internal self, and with the expectations of the external world. For better or worse, it is represented as a risky business.

For psychologists, this is largely the case by definition. Risk taking itself is regarded as part not only of abnormal but normal development, carrying not just negative but positive consequences. Certainly, we are alerted to the pathological bases of some risk taking behaviours, such as eating disorders and substance misuse (Rutter and Smith, 1995). Nonetheless, many normative formulations of adolescent psychology embrace risk taking. Cognitive developmental theory explains it in terms of the growing, but not yet fully developed, capacity to recognise consequences of their own actions and perspectives of others (Kohlberg, ref; Heaven, 1996). For Elkind (1967), adolescents’ egocentric social cognitions prompt them to develop ‘personal fables’; the resulting exaggerated concept of invulnerability carries dangers, but emerges from a normal developmental process. Those focusing on the development of identity argue that young people’s risk taking and experimentation are necessary parts of the individuation process required for full identity achievement (Marcia, 1966; Erikson 1968). Indeed much of the psychological literature presents adolescence as a risky business, but one in which risk taking is not only normal but desired – bearing the eventual fruits of integrated sense of self, self-esteem, and self regulation (Irwin and Millstein, 1986; Jack, 1986). This, unfortunately, goes none too far to relieve adult anxieties. All too often, it induces the ‘pedagogical paradox’ whereby in the desire to protect young people or ourselves, all too often we prevent them from achieving the maturity that risk taking and learning from mistakes might afford (de Winter and Noom, 2003).

From sociological and other disciplinary perspectives there are alternative ways of considering youth as a risky business – not by definition so much as by virtue of the world we live in. Within these quite disparate discourses, most are agreed that the nature of young people’s transitions to adulthood has changed markedly in the space of one generation. Prolonged years in education, later entry into the workforce, reduced state support for independence and delayed home-leaving, have made young people’s trajectories towards adulthood more protracted, desequenced and fragmented than before (Jones, 1995; Cohen and Ainley, 2000; EGRIS, 2001). Here, however, the consensus ends. What it means to be young in contemporary times is hotly contested, with questions of agency and structure, individualisation, risk and regulation brought to the fore. Neither the terms of debate nor the meta-theoretical contretemps arising are unfamiliar to academic social work. They have, for example, been engagingly exemplified

Beginning to do so, we may look first to the work of Beck and Giddens (Beck et al, 1994; Beck, 1998, 1999; Giddens, 1991, 1999). At the risk of oversimplifying through summary, both theorists propose that in the post-traditional order modernisation has burst its own logic, overturning the social, economic, political, and cultural foundations of industrial society. Risk and uncertainty are the insignia of a ‘runaway world’ (Giddens, 1999), by virtue of newly manufactured dangers or the dissolution of institutional constraints, destabilised social structures and diminished expert certainties. Individuals are forced to interpret diverse, unpredictable experiences in order to establish their own coherent biographies. No longer regulated by external structures and norms, the self has become a fluid and reflexive ‘biographical project’ (Giddens, 1991). With this comes the potential for all the new freedoms and life choices so gladly trumpeted by ‘third way’ politics. But at the same time conditions of doubt penetrate all social life; self and identity are necessarily fragile, individualisation becomes a lonely business ‘full of risks which need to be confronted and fought alone’ (Bauman, 2002, p. xvii).

For young people, the transition to adulthood becomes replete with opportunities and risks. Put positively, ‘life politics’ holds that young people, while not entirely free to create their own worlds, may now as never before be the architects of their own lives, free to negotiate their own pathways, take or avoid their own risks (Wallace and Kovatchevka, 1998; ESRC, 2004a). Put more bleakly, the culture of individualism, increasingly holding young people accountable for their own lives, all too often belies lived experience. The gaps between public/policy expectations, individual experience and aspirations can generate marginalisation, the sense of failure, mental health problems and self-harm (Rutter and Smith, 1995; EGRIS, 2001).

Challenges to this thesis have come principally from two corners. The first is the social structural critique, which recognises that preoccupations with risk and individualisation are central to contemporary life, but disputes their bases in reality. The argument here is that, despite dramatic social and economic change, existing patterns of inequality – poverty, class, gender and ethnic differences, unequal access to life chances and social capital – continue to be reproduced (Bourdieu, 1977; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). This thesis is well represented generally in the social work literature (Goldson, 2002; Garrett, 2003a,b), but the particular implications for young people and risk are not well explored. From related disciplines, however, there is sound evidence to suggest that the nature and success of the transition to adulthood are much influenced by class, culture, material and social resources; those less privileged struggle harder, are more exposed to risk and more likely to take it (Parker et al, 1998; Bynner, 2001; Schoon and Bynner, 2003). Seen in this light, risk-taking behaviours such as drug and alcohol use, unsafe sex and antisocial behaviour might be recognised as escapist diversion from mundane and frustrating everyday life. Deeper still, according Furlong and Cartmel, cuts
the pernicious ‘epistemological fallacy’, generated by a culture of individualism, whereby:

‘Blind to the existence of powerful chains of interdependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure.’ (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, p.114).

Structurally denied opportunities to become stakeholders in the adult world, and believing themselves accountable, youngsters are all the more likely to look for alternative, risky sources of satisfaction and esteem. If we are to understand their risk taking behaviour, we need better to understand the complexities of structure and agency involved.

The second major challenge to the reflexive individualisation thesis draws on Foucauldian theory, and prompts us to scrutinise our constructions of what is risky and what is not, what within and what beyond the pale. This approach recognises the meta-narratives of risk and uncertainty of late modern society, but sets these within a theoirisation of power relationships – diverse and localised, rather than monolithic. Strategies of governmentality are discursively produced through normalising expert knowledges, and deployed through multiple institutions in order to regulate populations and individuals (Rose and Miller, 1992; Rose, 1996; Lupton, 1999). Risk exists not as some external reality but as a ‘calculative rationality’ of governance, through which particular groups or individuals may be identified as ‘at risk’ or ‘high risk’, and thereby surveilled, managed, disciplined. Within neo-liberal governmenality, it is self-regulation that is privileged above all. The individual ‘homo economicus’ is invested with moral responsibility, guided by experts to make rational choices over lifestyle, body and mind. Where targeted as a member of a ‘risky’ group, the individual will be in need of extra support to self-regulate; where failing to meet normative standards, more co-ercive disciplinary techniques will come into play.

This line of argument has its detractors, not least on grounds of its non-democratised constructivism (see Strydom, 2002). Nonetheless, its emphasis on governmental and professional preoccupations with normativity and risk is helpful here. The terms of Foucauldian critique are also familiar enough to academic social work debate; in particular, the co-opting of the profession into the apparatus of ‘tutelary bureaucracy’ has been well highlighted (Pease and Fook, 1999; Garrett, 2003a; Jordan, 2004). But, again, little of this critique has focused directly on young people and risk. By contrast, others in the wider field of youth studies, notably Kelly (2000a & b, 2003) and Taite (1995), have called into question the way that youth is now constructed as by definition a risky category. Risk narratives, they argue, provide the promise, the justification and techniques for regulating young people’s behaviour, dispositions and ‘preferred futures’. Institutionalised structural inequalities are recoded as complex but quantifiable factors that place certain groups of young people at risk. Seen this way, the culture of individualism is an expression of the technology of governance that leaves young people feeling accountable for their own fates; taking or failing to avoid risks is cast as failure
to take responsibility for the self. Paradoxically this may generate exactly the 
risk taking – to escape or resist - that it seeks to control. Most important, 
Kelly’s argument does not dispute that young people take risks, nor trivialise 
them. But for him the danger of youth at risk discourses lies in their relentless 
pursuit of order and elimination of diversity, projects that ‘may lend 
themselves easily and joyously to political uses – anytime and everywhere’ 

The present discussion, of course, seeks to place young people’s risk taking on, not off, the social work agenda. For us, however, the Foucauldian critique is instructive in that it prompts us to reflect critically on our responses to young people and risk. That there is a strong case for further social work understanding of young people’s risk taking has already been argued. At the same time, however, we must continue to question whether professional responsibilities lie with promoting the expression of young people’s own identities, or simply those that conform to accepted norms (Lorenz, 2000).

**Research and theoretical insights**

If practitioners are to become ‘epistemically reflexive’, they need to be theoretically and research informed, capable of in-depth critical reflection on the constructions influencing their practice (Eraut, 1995; White, 1997; Ixer, 1999). For social workers potentially engaging with risky young people, the challenges are especially daunting - less because existing constructions must be unpicked than because they are little developed in practice. Despite sound enough guides for practice with teenagers (Sinclair et al, 1995; Daniel and Wassell, 2002), few of the recent research and theoretical developments in the wider field of youth studies have been noted or absorbed into social work. The ecological model now in vogue in child and family work (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) rests on inexplicit notions of the relationship between individual and context (Houston, 2004). Related concepts of vulnerability and resilience tell us more about coping with risk than taking it (Daniel and Wassell, 2002). Meanwhile all these constructions tend towards normativity, encouraging us little to question our yardsticks for acceptable or unacceptable risk (Garrett, 2003a). The final sections of this paper draw together some recent research findings and theoretical formulations in this area that might offer insights for social work practice. The review is exploratory rather than exhaustive or conclusive – it makes a start.

Looking first at patterns (rather than dynamics) of risk taking, there is good evidence from psychological and sociological research to persuade us that young people’s welfare and riskiness are associated with their material, cultural and relational contexts, the resources and role models available, and the extent to which they feel connected, supported, recognised (Jessor, 1984; Kagan, 1991; Schoon and Bynner, 2003). Several of the behaviours most worrying to policy makers, public and welfare professionals alike - smoking and teenage pregnancy, school exclusion, anti-social behaviour and crime - have been linked to social deprivation, albeit often mediated through family practices (Coleman and Hendry, 1999; Schoon and Bynner, 2003). Locality and culture are also influential: a government report in 2002, for example,
exposed how locally situated is young people’s risky sexual behaviour (DfES, 2004). Risk taking, and perception of it, differs for those growing up in cultures espousing traditional family and community values, from those espousing individualism (Brannen, et al, 1994). Family relationships and parenting styles themselves are influential too. Where, for example, parents take a negotiative stance, neither overly restrictive, nor unprotective, nor giving mixed messages, their teenagers are more likely to make socially acceptable and beneficial risk calculations (Brannen et al, 1994; Grotevand and Cooper, 1998). Finally, peers too are powerful mediators of young people’s risk choices. Contrary to public perception, this may well be in the direction of regulation rather deviation (Coleman and Hendry, 1999). Indeed, it seems that young people are more likely to say that they use drugs, in order to ‘look cool’, than to do so (FRANK, 2004); at the same time they are also more likely to be influenced by what others do than by what they say (ESRC, 2004b). Nonetheless, there is strong evidence that peer groups influence young people’s normalisation of risk, and their taking of it - whether in the quest for social identity or kudos, for escapism or thrill, or simply to fit in (Green et al, 2000; Denscombe, 2001; Lawy, 2002; France, 2002).

This brief overview of risk taking patterns and their associations is sufficient to persuade us that neither the model of self-inventing free agent, nor socio-structurally determined enactor, nor (un)regulated self-regulator, is alone sufficient to explain young people’s risk taking, nor what we make of it. Exploration of recent research on the dynamics and constructions of risk taking, however, may take our understanding further.

Several recent studies of young people’s risk taking have thrown light on the complex interplay of individual decision-making, identity and context. Cohen and Ainley (2000) for example, draw on cultural learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to highlight how young people develop their identities through learning in situated contexts of family, peers, community. Increasingly expected to manage their own reflexive life projects, their learning and choice making (risky or not) is locally and structurally situated. Likewise according to Lawy:

‘risk, identity and learning are mutually constitutive….the challenge facing.. young people (is) to seam together risk, identity and learning within a coherent narrative, and to do so in the face of competing interests and structural limits in the knowledge that the balance between them might, at any moment, be changed.’ (Lawy, 2002, p. 407).

The meaning of risk-taking - be it about ‘normal’ experiment, or normalising riskiness, escapism, or pursuit of status and pleasure - is fluid and shaped in this way. Ingham et al (1993) and Shiner and Newburn (1997), for example, have shown us how young people’s risk beliefs about sex or drugs become habituated, mediated through social relationships, transmitted wisdoms, localised myths, and experience-based knowledges. Green et al (2000) demonstrate how young people construct normalising risk hierarchies, with associated risk reputations conferring status or stigma, in social and cultural
contexts. There will also be power dimensions influencing the risk choices made in context. Girls, for example, may feel disempowered from pursuing ‘condom negotiations’, or may choose to smoke to resist the authority of the ‘good girl’ image (France, 2000). And so the interplay of agency and identity, structure and context, turns.

To take our understanding further, we may look beyond the empirical to some of the theoretical formulations that have been drawn into the study of youth, transition and risk. Emerging from a range of disciplines, these may not easily be stitched together without risk of obscuring their distinctions. What they share, however, is common recognition of the need to move beyond the dualism of structure and agency in understanding ‘the problem’ of young people. Firstly, we may look to the constructs of social, individual or identity capital. While for Putnam (2000), social capital is predominantly an attribute of communities, for Coleman (1988) it denotes the access of individuals to resources, information, networks and trustworthy relationships, as the basis for action. This formulation is closer to several put forward in youth studies. Raffo and Reeves (2000), for example, suggest that an ‘individualised system of social capital’ evolves for each young person in the context of the material and symbolic resources available to them in social, cultural, economic and temporal spaces. This may either support or constrain individual actions and choices (including risk related choices) and outcomes. Côté (2002), focusing more on identity formation, elaborates on how both the ‘tangible’ identity capital resources (material, class, gender, access) available to each young person, and the ‘intangible’ (personality, relationship qualities, intellectual attributes), will differ. As they are deployed, they will differ cumulatively, influencing each individual’s investment in their own life project, and the risks they take.

While Côté’s thesis highlights the uniqueness of individual transitions to adulthood, Bourdieu (1986,1990) places greater emphasis on the embeddedness of individual action in cultural and structural context, and with it the scope for reproduction of inequalities. In hierarchical social spaces, young people have different economic and cultural capital resources, and differential access to the ‘rules of the game’ of lifestyle and choice. Their choices may be understood in terms of ‘habitus’: the system of interconnected dispositions that help us interpret our surrounding world. Young people’s choices, for example to take or avoid risks, are indeed reflexive but are steered by life experience and capital; they are unique but may also be shared. Evans (2002), putting forward the related concept of ‘bounded agency’, expresses a similar view. Her conclusion is most worthy of note:

Young people are social actors in a social landscape. How they perceive the horizons depends on where they stand in the landscape and where their journey takes them. Where they go depends on the pathways they perceive, choose, stumble across or clear for themselves, the terrain and the elements they encounter. Their progress depends on how well they are equipped, the help they can call on when they need it, whether they go alone or together and who their fellow travellers are. If policies and interventions are to be made
effective, we need to sharpen our awareness of the interplay of structural forces and individual’s attempts to control their lives.’ (Evans, 2002, p. 265)

Implications for social work

This discussion has sought to explore and to set on the social work agenda both young people’s risk taking, and risk making - our construction of youth as a risky business. There is a central paradox here: why bother critiquing professional and policy fixations with young people as risk, when social work of all disciplines pays them little attention at all? The answer is that simply the fact that young people have become, by default, ‘not social work’s problem’, neither explains nor justifies their omission. It is not difficult to marshal the evidence of research and lived experience confirming that youth is potentially a risky time, either by definition or particularly in contemporary times. That the ‘problem’ should not be sidestepped by social work is a starting point. How it may be addressed must be the subject of further discussion and research; this paper aims not to conclude but to open the debate.

This said, three points stand out for social work thus far. Firstly, there is indeed a wide range of research and theory from related disciplines that might inform social work thinking and practice with young people and risk. While some constructs explored – social structuralist, post-modernist, Foucauldian – are familiar enough in academic social work, few have been applied directly to young people, and fewer or none incorporated into the packages of ready-made ‘vade mecum’ knowledges available for practitioners (Taylor, 2004). Perhaps this is no bad thing. However challenging it may be to make collective sense of research and theoretical insights coming from quite disparate sources, we have the chance to do so, without the need to subvert existing entrenched wisdoms. For critical and reflexive social work practice, this can only be an opportunity.

A second key message must be that when we seek to understand young people’s risk taking, we need to consider them as agents of their own lives, pursuing their own trajectories, situated within their own social, material and relational worlds. Neither the life politics of reflexive individualisation, nor the determinism of social structuralism, nor the regulatory thrust of governmentality, is sufficient to explain the complex interplay of agency, structure and power involved. To understand these, we need to look more closely at what risk taking means to young people, its dynamics, and the relationships and resources surrounding. We might also draw on some particular concepts - cultural learning, identity capital or habitus have been selected here - to elucidate. Most importantly, we must recognise that risk taking is integrally bound up with the development of young people’s identities. To problematise this is a necessary and productive activity for informing practice. But to consider risk taking always and necessarily problematic would be missing the point. We must start by recognising risk taking as a routine, even desirable, component of young people’s lives and
development. Where and how we begin to define it as troubling or troublesome must then be up for scrutiny.

This brings us to the third and final message for social work: that we must look not only to what risk taking means in young people’s lives, but to what we ‘make it’ in our professional minds and actions. Rather than simply going along with neo-liberal orthodoxies, we need consistently to question the distinction between what is normal and abnormal, acceptable and unacceptable risk – between youth in transition, youth in trouble and youth as trouble. If we are to aspire to social work practice with young people that is critically reflexive and embraces uncertainty (Taylor and White, 2000, 2001), that is constructive and dialogical (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000a,b; Pease, 2002), and that maintains its long-held commitment to mediating individuals and society, we could do worse than start from here.

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December 2004
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