

From the Sociology of Risk to a Critical Sociology of Suffering

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Introduction

The concept of risk is now well established as a 'unit-idea'¹ of contemporary sociology. At the level of sociological discourse, 'risk' features as an organising principle of society, a core component of social experience and a major co-ordinate of personal identity. Encounters with risk are perceived to take place within every aspect of our public and private lives. It has become sociological common sense to approach 'the hermeneutics risk' not only as a means to reveal the definitive character of social life in (late) modern societies, but also, as a tool for devising the task of sociology.

In this draft paper, I present an analytical overview of the contrasting ways in which the concept of risk has been adapted for the purposes of sociological analysis. However, above all else, my efforts are devoted to outlining the possible forms of engagement that a critical sociology of suffering might bring to the sociology of risk. I argue that, while a sociological study of human suffering can contribute to the development of a more conceptually elaborated account of the social meaning of risk, it also provides a vantage point from which to bring critical questions of morality and politics to bear upon the forms of discourse and terminology by which sociologists are inclined to represent the lived reality of human affliction, tragedy and loss.

I am particularly concerned to confront some of the ways in which the concept of risk has become a favoured means by which sociologists venture to pass comment upon the social and cultural dimensions of "hazard" and "catastrophe"; that is, I seek to advance sociological understanding of the ways in which the knowledge of such events is mediated at the level of social consciousness. Accordingly, I engage in debate over the ways in which the concept of risk is currently being used as a surrogate term for bringing events and experiences of human suffering under sociological scrutiny. This is to take seriously the observation that news media are far more inclined to concentrate their attentions upon the harms caused by taking risks, rather than the technical means by which these are managed and assessed (Singer and Endreny 1987). More often than not, matters of 'risk' are communicated for public attention via graphic portrayals of bodies in pain and harrowing images of people in mourning and distress. On this understanding, I propose that for us to attend properly to the *human significance* of risk, we should be prepared to approach 'the brute fact of suffering'² as an object of sociological research.

To this end, I draw inspiration from recent attempts to devise programmes of research into 'social suffering'. This is a trans-disciplinary project that incorporates a wide range of literatures from across the social sciences and humanities (Graubard 1996; Wilkinson 2004). For the purposes of this paper, I offer only the merest outline of what this entails for sociology, for elsewhere, and following the lead of writers such as Veena Das (Das 1997; Das et al 2000; 2001) and Arthur Kleinman (Kleinman

1986; 1991; 1999; Kleinman et al 1999, I argue that this manner of research may well require that we radically revise longstanding accounts of the sociological tradition as well as its current trajectories of intellectual debate and methods of study (Wilkinson 2001a; 2004a; 2004b; Morgan and Wilkinson 2001). Here I am only concerned to go so far as to initiate further processes of dialogue and debate within domains of risk research over the extent to which it may be by a more thorough sociological investigation of the forms of culture that mediate experiences of pain, and by which people acquire a greater imagination for the suffering of others, that our accounts of “risk consciousness” and “affects of risk” are provided with more analytical purchase and brought within a more human frame.

In this first section, I offer a brief summary account of current fields of interest that characterise the sociology of risk. In this, I am chiefly concerned to bring analytical attention to bear upon the ways in which the concept of risk is used as a surrogate term for addressing the social perception of human suffering, or rather, some of the ways in which this takes place in experience. In the middle sections I provide a summary outline of the arenas of debate that I take to comprise a ‘sociology of suffering’. Finally I offer some reflections upon the terms of engagement by which the latter might be used to both caution and advance the sociological conception of risk.

The Sociology of Risk: A Critical Review

The level of sociological interest in matters of risk is now such that it is widely identified as a distinct field of study in its own right³. However, it should be added that by no means do sociologists that work in this area share in the same agendas of research, and certainly, there are marked variations in their theoretical and methodological approaches to risk. Moreover, if one compares the various introductory accounts of this topic, then it is clear that there is no overall agreement as to how we should account for these differences (Adams 1995; Boyne 2003 Kemshall 2002; Lupton 1999). At the broadest level of analysis, I suggest there are at least three distinct domains of sociological writing on risk that define the field.

In the first place, a large number of studies are devoted to the task of bringing sociological insights to bear upon actuarial techniques of risk analysis and disaster management. Indeed, some of the earliest sociological dealings with risk tend to be explicitly ‘managerial’ in their focus (Perrow 1984; Short 1984; Heimer 1988 and Clarke and Short 1993). Much of this work involves an attempt to explain the discrepancies between expert assessments and lay perceptions of risk. By highlighting the bearing of “social context” and “cultural worldview” upon the contrasting ways in which different types of people negotiate the meaning of risk, most of this research is designed to advise industries and governments on how to develop more sophisticated methods of “risk communication” so as to better “manage” social conflicts over the costs and benefits of “hazardous” technologies. Here social scientists have brought more analytical attention to bear upon the extent to which lay perceptions of risk are not so much related to an individual’s knowledge of statistical probabilities, but rather, to the social and moral meanings they attach to particular types of hazard. Under this emphasis, the perceived reality of risk in everyday life is approached as a social construction that always incorporates shifting cultural values, ethical orientations and elements of political bias (Douglas and

Wildavsky 1982; Lofstedt and Frewer 1998; Caplan 2000; Slovic 2000; Pidgeon et al 2003).

A second genre of literature may be characterised in terms of an attempt to devise a 'hermeneutics of risk' for cultural narratives of modernity. In this context, the works of Ulrich Beck (1992; 1995; 1999), Mary Douglas (1985; 1992; 1996), Frank Furedi (1997; 2003) Anthony Giddens (1990; 1991) and Niklas Luhmann (1993) have received most critical attention. The concept of risk is debated in terms of its capacity to reveal the essential character of modern processes of rationalisation and as a phenomenon that is heavily implicated within the dominant social psychology of our times (Wilkinson 2001b). In these literatures, contrasting accounts of risk invoke opposing judgements on the cultural and historical character of modern societies; particularly with regard to the extent to which this is liable to involve populations in concerns over matters of personal health and safety. Writers may well venture to offer political points of view on the "hazards" of modernization and the forms of institutional and individual behaviours that are best suited to respond to these, however, the overall purpose of this work is heavily oriented towards the opportunities presented by risk research for devising more broad ranging accounts of processes of reflexive modernization, individualization and the social determinants of moral solidarity. Accordingly, overt attempts are made to relate matters of risk to longstanding sociological debates over the terms of discussion most suited for narrating the cultural experience of modern societies and the dynamics of social change. Where the first body of literature is characterised by an attempt to export and apply sociology to the technical domain of risk analysis, in this second area of research, the focus is largely placed upon what the public prominence of matters of risk implies for the task of theorizing society. Here sociological interest in risk is inspired more by what this phenomenon reveals about established forms of sociological reasoning than by what sociology might bring to techniques of risk analysis per se.

Thirdly, an increasing amount of sociological attention is now being given to the extent to which risk features as part of the apparatus of state surveillance and control. In this context, sociologists tend to regard the concept of risk as a psychic tool for drawing peoples' sense of personal identity, professional responsibilities, moral purposes and conceptions of social justice in line with the incursions of neo-liberalism upon forms of economy, programmes of public welfare and the organisation of health care (Garland 1997; O'Malley 2004; Petersen 2003; Petersen and Bunton 1997; Petersen et al 1999). The "governmentality" approach towards the study of risk draws upon Michel Foucault's later writings on the ethics of subjectivity in order to highlight the ways in which the labelling of attitudes and behaviours in terms of 'risk' works as a means to enforce more rigid standards of "self-discipline" and "personal responsibility" upon society (Foucault 1977; 1980; 1987; 1990; 1991a; 1991b). This is seen to be a central component of the disciplinary techniques by which states aim to achieve "the conduct of conduct"; that is, the creation of self-regulatory regimes of institutional governance (Dean: 9-39). Here sociological interest in risk concerns the ways in which the popularisation of this concept points to the creation of new mentalities of government and psychologies of citizenship tailored to the rationality of the marketplace and the ethics of right-wing individualism.

I propose that each of these bodies of sociological literature on risk incorporate implicit references to experiences of human suffering. While never addressed as a matter for discussion in its own right, I maintain that ‘the brute fact of suffering’ is often implied as a means to underline the seriousness of these endeavours. Moreover, I would argue that in some instances, the association between risk and suffering is taken for granted as part of the logic for adopting ‘risk’ as a means to analyse the determinants of cultural attitudes and social behaviours in modern societies. I want to claim that, at least at the level of sociological discourse, risk is being used to draw our attention to ‘human suffering’ either as a lived reality or as a distinct potentiality.

Once again, I suggest there are at least three ways in which this takes place. Firstly, (although to some it may seem too obvious to warrant analysis), where sociological studies of risk feature prominently within the domain of disaster studies, then we may well recognise the overriding purpose of all this work as being related to the ways in which societies anticipate and respond to events of extreme suffering. In this context, perhaps we should understand a heightened perception of critical events of human suffering as an ever present component risk management. Nevertheless, in moves to incorporate a greater emphasis upon the ‘human dimensions’ of risk and disaster, a number of researchers have sought to initiate debates over the social production of peoples’ ‘vulnerability’ to damage, harm and loss. Here a critical focus upon the terms of vulnerability is intended to sound notes of caution towards fields of expertise that, while researching models of disaster preparedness and technologies of emergency response, may lose sight of the social and political factors that make people prone to suffer disaster (Blaickie et al 1994). Indeed, some even use this as a means to bring questions of human rights and ecology to bear upon the forms of benefit-cost analysis incorporated within technocratic approaches to the management of risk and disaster mitigation (Bankoff et al 2004; Boyce 2000). In the more ‘radical wings of disaster studies, it appears that moves are afoot to emphasise the interactions between the terms of risk management and dimensions of human suffering.

Secondly, I contend that where social theorists have sought to conceptualise components of cultural consciousness and moral outlooks in terms of ‘risk’, then more often than not, this is used as a means to debate social attitudes and responses to suffering. For example, it seems clear that Ulrich Beck’s conception of ‘risk consciousness’ incorporates the understanding that people are being confronted by the knowledge of potential disasters that involve some of the most extreme forms of human affliction encountered in modern times. Certainly, when referring to the disasters at Bhopal and Villa Parisi so as to depict a world of ‘multiplying risks’, he devotes space to describing the physical injuries, numbers of deaths and the mourning of survivors so as to underline the seriousness of his concerns (Beck 1992: 43-44). Moreover, I suggest that Beck’s emphasis upon the extent to which ‘risk consciousness’ intensifies our fears and anxieties about ‘hazards of annihilation’ is tantamount to a sociological discourse upon the cultural significance and political implications of the pain and distress caused by the threat of suffering (Beck 1995: 73-110). He is emphatic when stating that, on the terms of his analysis, the potential for enhanced levels of reflexivity within a ‘radicalized modernity’ relies upon the extent to which people are made to suffer an “all-encompassing and all-permeating insecurity” about their lives (Beck 1997: 168). Indeed, by highlighting the similarities between contemporary political debates on risk and forms of Christian theodicy, Mary Douglas goes further than most social theorists towards highlighting the extent to

which cultural beliefs about risk concern the ways in which individuals respond to the understanding that they live in a world in which, so it appears, there is *too much* suffering (Douglas 1992: 22-37).

Finally, perhaps it is in the context of sociological research into health care and medical practice, that we are liable to encounter some of the most explicit references to the association between knowledge of risk and the lived experience of pain and suffering. For example, in her study of the ways in which sex workers manage health risks at work, Teela Sanders uses this as a means to elaborate upon the range of harms and forms of violence that women prostitutes are liable to experience (Sanders 2004). In this study, the analysis of risk is identified as a means to bring sociological attention to matters of physical danger as well as those of emotional trauma. Similarly, writers such as Nina Hallowell, would have us concentrate on the affective dimensions of risk, so as to bring analytical attention to the impacts of biomedical discourse upon the ways women suffer the anxiety and distress being labelled as potentially 'at risk' of having cancer (Hallowell et al 2004). Where at one level, the purpose of such work may be directed towards debates on governmentality, at another (although related) level it seems clear, that she is working to emphasise the extent to which the process of social and self-identification as a subject 'at-risk' involves a great deal of personal suffering (Hallowell 1999).

If, in these instances, I am correct in my identification of the concept of risk as a surrogate term for evoking knowledge and experiences of suffering, or rather, a device for engaging in critical debate over the political and moral consequences of the pains experienced by individuals in their interactions with medical practitioners and welfare services, what are we to make with of this? Is this to be treated as no more than a mundane observation, or is it a matter worthy of more considered analysis and debate? To what extent should we be concerned to address 'risk consciousness' as 'knowledge about human suffering', or a means by which 'the brute fact of suffering' is made part of our conscious (emotional) experience of the world? What is sociologically at stake here, and more specifically, why should any of this matter to the sociology of risk?

In the sections that follow, I outline some possible ways in which one might *begin* to answer these questions. I am more interested to initiate a process of dialogue and debate about the extent to which sociologists might venture to address the experience of human suffering, than I am to argue for a definitive point of view on this matter. My main purpose is to argue for the sociological value of this endeavour. However, I will venture to draw attention to some of the political, moral and critical implications of a 'sociology of suffering' for the sociology of risk.

The Problem of Suffering for Sociology

It may well be the case that human suffering is a primary inspiration for almost every work of sociology. Where every part of our experience of life may be framed as a topic of sociological concern, then more often than not, this takes place with a focus upon the ways in which people are made socially vulnerable to some manner of injustice, injury and harm. Through sociology, modern society is exposed as comprised of individuals denied a dignified existence, communities breaking apart under the corrosive force of rapid social change and large sections of population with

no hope of fulfilling their human potential so long as they remain excluded from the wealth and opportunities of a privileged few. The tenor of sociological discourse has always been more attuned to the misery of the human condition than its occasions for joy. Nevertheless, while human suffering inspires the work of sociology, there is no longstanding tradition of sociological debate on 'human suffering' *per se*. For the moment at least, the 'sociology of suffering' is unlikely to be recognised as a distinctive field of study. While the existential character of human suffering is readily identified as a pressing concern for philosophy, theology, the arts and medical science, it is unlikely to be framed as matter in need of sociological attention.

There may be some good reasons for this. The majority of sociologists may rightly consider the concept of 'suffering' to be so broad ranging in its terms of reference, and thereby so open to cultural interpretation, that it holds no value as a category of 'scientific' analysis. It could be out of preference for terms such as 'alienation', 'anomie', and 'risk consciousness' that they tend to omit direct reference to 'human suffering' from their work. In addition to this, some might argue that as a matter of ethical principle we should resist the temptation to bring sociological attention to bear upon the details of personally violating experience, on the grounds that the language of social science is bound to trivialise the 'human significance' of suffering to a point that is morally objectionable (Frank 2001; Steiner 1966). Accordingly, one can take the view that, not only is it out of a concern for analytical precision, but also, as a matter of ethical principle that, to date, the majority of sociologists have not ventured to address 'human suffering' as an object of investigation on its own terms.

However, a few have questioned these points of view. For example, Alvin Gouldner has argued that, the omission of the category of 'suffering' from social theory, and the absence of any well-developed agenda of sociological research on this subject is more a result of the 'dispassionate' ways in which the majority of sociologists conduct their work. As far as Gouldner is concerned, the greater danger here is that in failing to devote attention to the lived reality of human suffering, 'scientific' sociology runs the risk of becoming both morally suspect and intellectually stunted. He maintains that by distancing itself from the language of suffering, sociology leaves itself open to the accusation that it displays both a heartless disregard for humanity and ignorance of the social experience of modernity (Gouldner 1968).

Similarly, Veena Das (1997) and Pierre Bourdieu (1999) raise the disquieting suggestion that in order to have their work resonate with a language of 'expert authority', sociologists have been all too ready to ignore, marginalise, and even 'silence', the genuine voice of people who experience extremes of violence, material hardship and social upheaval. Following Gouldner, these writers argue that, by failing to devote explicit attention to the *lived reality* of human suffering, sociologists risk finding themselves both allied to the interests of those whose positions of power and privilege are maintained at the cost of doing violence to large numbers of people, and also, conceptually blind to an experience of humanity that is vital for understanding the social character of modern times.

Indeed, the works of Das and Bourdieu now comprise part of a broader movement to address this alleged deficit in the sociological account of humanity via a programme of research into the phenomenon of 'social suffering'. Such work is addressed to a wide range of spectacular and ordinary occasions when human dignity is violated and

people come to some manner of grief and harm (Kleinman et al 1997; Bourdieu et al 1999; Farmer 1999; Kim et al 2000; Das et al 2000; 2001). In every instance attention is given to the ways in which critical events are experienced as *social* forces and *cultural* phenomena. In this regard, there is a particular concern to make clear the ways in which people directly encounter the *social meaning* of their afflictions. Commentators aim to highlight the extent to which experiences of human suffering involves far more than the bio-mechanics of pain, the sheer numbers of people killed in conflict zones or a calculated level of disability, scarcity and want. In these writings an explicit attempt is made to have us reflect on the ways in which individuals actively *experience* the social significance and moral meaning of their physical afflictions, material deprivations and loss.

A great deal is perceived to be at stake in these endeavours. In first place, by creating symbolic forms of culture and styles of writing to convey a greater part of the lived experience of suffering, it is hoped that it may be possible to invigorate public debate on the abuse of human rights, and evoke greater outpourings of compassion towards the pains of others. Writers who broach this topic aim to bring the standpoint of those 'in' suffering to bear directly upon the hearts and minds of policy makers, politicians and publics. Great hopes are invested in the possibility that where people can be made to *feel* more sympathy towards, and responsibility for, the suffering of others, then they shall be motivated to act against the political decisions and social conditions that damage and ruin human life (Kleinman 1995; Kleinman and Kleinman 1997).

Second, a number of commentators contend that such works not only serve to draw public attention to the lived experience of human suffering, but also, provide some measure of healing at the level of social meaning for those 'in' pain. Much intrigue surrounds the possibility for a major component of the embodied sensation of suffering to take place as a consequence of the negative meanings that people acquire and create for events in their lives; particularly where these are encountered as 'senseless' and 'for no purpose'. In this context, researchers approach their task in terms of an effort to equip people with the cultural resources to establish a means to narrate traumatic experiences that would otherwise be left in 'silence', so that they might arrive in the position to resume the task of living (Morris 1997). The practice of ethnography itself is identified as part of a 'politics of recognition' (Taylor 1992) that contributes to the creation of public spaces in which sufferers may achieve a shared voice for recounting their experience, and most importantly, a social acknowledgement of the terrible events they have endured (Das 1995; 1997a; 1997b). Indeed, in many instances, it is with the knowledge that others acknowledge their *experience* of pain that suffering individuals and communities report themselves to embark upon a journey towards recovery and healing (Adelson 2001; Chuengsatiansup 2001; Scheper-Hughes 1998).

However, while most are clear as to the overriding moral purpose of this work and are prepared to celebrate ethnography as the favoured means of exposing the brute facts of 'what suffering *does* to people', a great deal of debate surrounds the extent to which research and writing on 'social suffering' is *adequate* to meet these objectives. Indeed, in almost every instance commentators bear testimony to an acute sense of *failing* in their task. All share in the understanding that some of the most vital elements in the experiences they seek to describe continually *resist* representation in language (Wilkinson 2001). Accordingly, the terminology and methodology of social

science is perceived to poorly equipped to account for the suffering of humanity as lived experience.

Generally speaking, there are two contrasting approaches to explaining this difficulty. Some are inclined to explain this with a critical focus upon the ways in which we are culturally conditioned to rationalize our experience of the world. Others hold to the view that this is related to the capacity for some part of the experience of suffering to perpetually defy our cultural means to self-expression and social understanding. The first position aims to better understand the historically and culturally relative ways in which we 'frame' the meaning of suffering in the hope of discovering new ways to make this experience more productive for thought and action. The second is inclined to work at convincing us that our analysis should proceed by acknowledging that, at some point, we are always bound to be defeated in this task.

For example, in his efforts to promote a 'biocultural' model of pain, David Morris (1991; 1998) is inclined to adopt the first position and argues for a 'cultural' account of this problem. Accordingly, he maintains that people's experiences of suffering are always relative to the particular cultural narratives through which they relate to the exigencies of self and others. As far as Morris is concerned, 'the problem of suffering' is no more than a *textual* constraint, and therefore, it is always possible for us to devise symbolic forms of representation that allow for a more authentically meaningful account of this experience. In this context, he celebrates the 'postmodern' turn within the cultural discourse of modernity for the extent to which it allows for the possibility of 'a richer narrative of recovered voices' to break through the silence imposed on individuals by 'the modernist myth that suffering is a quintessentially private act' (Morris 1998 192-201). For Morris, the conceptual and analytical frustrations that characterise the attempt to represent human suffering are essentially a consequence of our cultural history and in no way should be taken to betray the existence of some core element in this experience that is irreducible to language. From this perspective, there is no raw datum in suffering that exists somehow beyond the bounds of articulation, Rather, this is entirely a matter of cultural perception that is always open to textual modification (Morris 1998: 216).

By contrast, in arguing for the second position Arthur Frank maintains that the 'mute embodied sense of absence' that comprises the pain of suffering renders the essential part of this 'unspeakable' (Frank 1995; 1996; 2001). Frank is committed to the view that there is always something 'in' suffering that remains beyond all that we can understand or say. Reflecting on his own experience of being a cancer patient, he maintains that some of the greatest personal injury he experienced was not so much related to the physical consequences of the disease. Rather, it came as a result of the suggestion that he could, and should, find a way to talk about his suffering. What he held to be most personally significant about his suffering was a sense of pure negation; for Frank, suffering is above all 'the reality of what is not'. As he searched for a way to live with and beyond his experience, he settled on the conclusion that it was most important for people to recognise that 'suffering involves experiencing yourself on the other side of life as it should be, and no thing, no material [or cultural] resource, can bridge that separation'. (Frank, 2001: 355).

These contrasting ways of relating to 'the problem of suffering' involve far more than mere differences in intellectual opinion. They are also related to opposing moral

perspectives and political responses to suffering. For example, as far as Frank is concerned the very attempt to conceptualise human suffering may itself have the unintended consequence of intensifying experiences of pain and misery. Accordingly, by labouring to explain his personal experience of suffering, Frank aims to enable us to recognise the occasions where silence amounts to the most humane and morally productive response to his condition. His political and moral purpose is to oppose forms of therapeutic health care that, so he claims, amount to an assault on human dignity by suggesting that we *should* find a meaning for suffering. Rather, it is much better to acknowledge from the start that the negative force of this experience is constituted by an embodied sense of being ultimately 'useless' and 'for no purpose' (Levinas 1988). It is by recognising that the pain of suffering defies meaning that we might best help people to live with and beyond the critical events in their lives. The best way of honouring the human dignity of those who suffer is with silent recognition of their plight.

However, this political and moral stance of silence is viewed with suspicion in other quarters. For example, writers such as Das are inclined to share in Hannah Arendt's horror at the capacity of expert 'double-talk' to work at silencing the harsh reality of lived experiences of human affliction (Arendt, 1968:7-9); the greater danger is identified in the extent to which an attitude of silence does not so much disclose more of the truth about human suffering, but rather, contrives to 'degrade' all this to no more than a 'meaningless triviality'. On this account, an attitude of silence is all too easily adopted as the official response to the suffering of 'superfluous' populations; the decision to remain silent is not so much part of 'a politics of recognition', but rather, a political strategy by which expert authorities work to ignore the humanity of those in conditions of extreme adversity and social distress. For these writers, the effort to create symbolic forms of culture to bestow a proper 'meaning' upon suffering is approached not only as a matter of intellectual urgency, but also, as part of an urgent work of social reconstruction and psychic healing; indeed it is the ground on which we begin to address our moral responsibility to care for the suffering of others (Das 1997b; Kleinman 1988; Morris 1991).

Clearly both approaches are involved in efforts to criticise and reform the concepts and methods of social science. Moreover, where humanly speaking, so much is perceived to be at stake in this work, perhaps we should not be surprised to find that many share in the understanding that this *demands* a radical reappraisal of the moral and political value of sociological research. Writers do not shy away from expressing a pronounced scepticism towards the institutional cultures and intellectual biases of Western academe. Indeed, one might even say that such work is not only inspired by a shocking sense of the failure of social science in face of the brute facts of suffering, but also, by the conviction that, as social scientists, they remain entrenched in the position of *continually failing* to establish the cultural conditions suited to overcome this difficulty.

I would like to suggest here that, while the majority approach these problems with a view to establishing 'winning arguments' or achieving substantial measures of reform to social science with the means to more fully account for the experience of suffering, there is much more to be made of this ongoing sense of failure. More specifically, I am interested to debate the extent to which this holds value as a means to advance some of the principle purposes of research into social suffering. Accordingly, I am

inclined to argue that insofar as such work is dogged by the *pain of failure*, this may be taken not so much as an indication of the extent to which social science falls short of addressing the brute facts of human suffering, but rather, as an opportunity to advance in this direction (Wilkinson 2004).

It is already the case that some have begun to approach their work in these terms. For example, at the same time as Arthur Kleinman is alert to the potential for ethnography to convey some part of the felt intensity of a person's misery and pain to a wider public, he is sensitive to the extent to which this manner of research and writing tends to draw one up against *the limits* of language and moral meaning. At this point, he is inclined to advance the view that ethnography becomes a form critical praxis in relation to the ways in which the ethnographer becomes frustrated by the sense of failing to achieve an adequate account of their object of research. He writes:

What is special about ethnography...is the practice it realizes....The ethnographer's angle of exposure places her so uncomfortably between distinctive moral worlds and local and global ethical discourse and, what is more, creates such a destabilizing tension between them that she is forced to become, even at times it seems from published accounts against her will, self-reflexively critical of her own positioning as well as attentive to the new and unexpected possibilities that can (and so often do in real life) emerge.

(Kleinman 1999: 414-15)

A more elaborated and personal account of how this may take place is provided by Vieda Skultans (1998) in her writings on the experiences of Latvians recovering from the trauma of Soviet rule. Her study begins with the confession of experiencing the pain of discovering that the very attempt to describe part of the reality of human suffering has made question her own of sense personal integrity and professional vocation. Indeed, in giving vent to her frustration, Skultans even ventures to suggest that the effort to translate the content of this semantic agony into the traditional frameworks and ready-made categories of social science may well be akin to 'the impossibility of the well-fed anthropologist carrying out a participant observation study of famine' (Skultans 1998: 21). However, with this understanding, she does not approach the failure of her work as a matter that prevents her from advancing in her understanding of what suffering does to people; rather, she considers this to hold value as an insight into the lived reality of this experience. She argues that an essential part of the experience of suffering is constituted by the pain of struggling *and failing* to construct a positive meanings for self and society in the aftermath of events in which these are violated and destroyed. Accordingly, in this instance Skultans' approach is to take the difficulty of understanding as an opportunity *for* understanding; she reflects on her own experience of failing as a factor that allows her to more perceptive towards the experiences she seeks to describe.

In this brief literature review, I have only gone so far as to outline some of the principle domains of analytical inquiry and moral debate that feature within contemporary writing on 'social suffering'. In keeping with the spirit of this work it must be emphasised that much of this remains only at the point of beginning. However, I am inclined to argue that this 'departure' holds significance for our overall approach to sociology. On the above evidence, I suggest that while there may no final agreement as to how a 'sociology of suffering' should approach its object of study,

nevertheless, the character debate this inspires is worthy of recognition as distinct domain of research. Moreover, it may well present us with new ways of ‘thinking with suffering’ about the moral implications and political impacts of the terms by which we represent and account for problems of society. However, to return to the main purpose of this paper, why should any of this matter to the sociology of risk?

For Dialogue and Debate

Research on ‘social suffering’ is approached as a field of study that has the potential to make a profound and lasting contribution to the reformulation of our intellectual and ethical concerns. The effort to provide a better account of what actually happens to people ‘in’ suffering is not only understood to reflect a moral demand to re-interpret the meaning of modern history, but also, a concern to ‘humanize’ the ways we relate to one another as global citizens. We are hereby challenged to incorporate within our accounts of social life, a fuller acknowledgement of what occurs to the humanity of those who suffer under extremes of economic hardship, social injustice and political oppression. In dwelling on what suffering *does* to people, and by developing new ways of *thinking with* the pain and distress of embodied experience, it is suggested that we might arrive in a position to radically reappraise the moral and political value of contemporary social science.

Clearly it is impossible to embark upon a full evaluation of such grand ambitions in the context of a more limited discussion of what this might bring to the sociology of risk. However, if there is any truth in my suggestion that are aspects of the risk debate in social science that draw researchers to the brink of confronting the brute facts of human suffering, or rather, incorporate implicit reference to traumatic experiences of human affliction as means to debate the politics of ‘risk consciousness’, then perhaps this is an appropriate area of study from which to initiate debates about the broader ramifications of this work. Put bluntly, if we are really to take seriously some of the critical arguments and forms of protest that characterise the ‘sociology of suffering’, then perhaps we should expect these to appear most relevant to areas of research that border upon these concerns. From the terms of dialogue and debate by which the sociology of risk relates to the sociology of suffering (and vice versa), it may be that we shall uncover a vantage point from which to assess the wider promise of this work.

As a means to begin this process, I suggest there are two main areas of debate to engage with here. The first concerns the suggestion raised by works on ‘social suffering’ that the abstract terminology of social science fails to provide us with sufficient insight into the *human dimensions* of our problems of research. For example, Arthur and Joan Kleinman claim that whereas economic indicators of suffering, such as the World Health Organizations metric of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYS), may have its uses as tool for identifying those most ‘at risk’ of suffering damaging levels of material and physical deprivation, all too often it leads to people being treated in purely instrumental terms as a ‘problem’ to be addressed in terms of ‘efficiency and cost’. In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu (1999) argues that rational vocabularies of social science amount to a form of ‘symbolic violence’ when used to account for the pains of lived experience? If we are to take seriously the suggestion that the ‘cultural grammar’ of social science has often served to allow politicians, policy makers and publics, to distance themselves from the human consequences of their decisions and behaviours, what are we to make of the concept

of risk in this regard? When does the language of 'risk' serve to conceal more than it explains about the painful reality of a world become inhuman? Moreover, to what extent should we be willing to engage with programmes of research into 'social suffering' as a means to discover the extent to which this takes place?

The second area for debate that I want to mention here concerns the extent to which a 'sociology of suffering' might serve more as a means to enhance the sociological account 'risk consciousness', rather than merely subject this to ethical scrutiny. Accordingly, we might take the 'sociology of suffering' not only as a means to engage in debate over the ideological value of 'risk', but further, as a means to embark upon a more elaborated account of the qualities of emotional experience and modes of cognition that we recognise to be taking place in relation to the social perception of risk. This is to treat seriously the claims raised by those writing on 'social suffering' that, to date, the majority of social scientists have failed to incorporate a proper account of the multiple ways in which suffering takes place as *lived experience*. It involves us embarking upon a more rigorous analysis of the possible ways in which people's knowledge of risk comprises elements of 'pain', that under particular social and cultural circumstances may intensify to the point of being experienced in terms of a 'problem of suffering'.

Efforts are already underway to construct more elaborated sociological theories of the ways in which the experience of suffering comprises social consciousness as a phenomenon 'without meaning' and 'devoid of moral purpose' (Wilkinson 2004). Accordingly, it may be possible for us to identify the social and cultural conditions under which people are most likely to encounter suffering as 'meaningless' and as a matter that stands radically opposed to moral sensibility. There is mounting sociological and medical evidence to suggest that our sensitivity towards pain is moderated by the dynamics of social perception and cultural experience (ibid. 16-45). An increasing number of researchers are venturing to identify the extent to which the social dynamics of cultural reproduction and exchange are implicated within the development of a shared imagination for the suffering of others and the force of humanitarian moral sentiment (Boltanski 1999; Tester 2001; Wilkinson 2004: 108-56)

On this account, the analytical value of a sociology of suffering for the sociology of risk lies in the extent to which the former provides the latter with greater insight into the forms of experience engendered by knowledge of risk. If we are to accept that, at least at the level of popular discourse, matters of 'risk' are communicated and acquire political resonance in terms of the ways they confront people with 'the brute fact that suffering exists, then perhaps, it is by engaging in a more thorough exploration of the ways in which society is conditions to experience and respond to human suffering that we advance our accounts of the social meaning of risk? Moreover, if we are to increasingly take note of the affective dimensions of risk as a means to account for the parameters social perception, as well as the ways risk impinges upon the realms of 'subjectivity', then perhaps we should be venturing to frame these concerns not so much as a response to or experience of risk, but more in terms of 'encounters with human suffering'?

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¹ I have in mind here the account of "unit-ideas" as outlined by Robert Nisbet in *The Sociological Tradition* (1966, Heinemann)

² By using this phrase I intend to evoke Max Weber's accounts of this matter in terms of its relationship to the dynamics of 'rationalization'. See Weber..

³ Note on the sociology of risk