

‘We’ll deal with it when it happens!’ – social identity, self-realisation and household risk mitigation

Abstract

Why do some at-risk householders resist the idea of increasing the flood-resilience of their homes? Presenting an analysis of interviews and focus groups with householders in flood-risk areas, this paper demonstrates the importance of Tajfel & Turner’s (1986) *social identity theory* for understanding how the public respond to household risks.

Householders' choices of discourse, it is argued, are influenced by normative processes that operate within social in-groups. Some of these discourses deny the legitimacy of long-term preparations for flooding. Asking people to make such preparations, therefore, is tantamount to asking them to make less secure their membership of their in-groups and to compromise, therefore, their sense of place in the social world.

An understanding of these discourses helps explain why so few householders take precautions against hazards such as flooding. To illustrate this point, two examples of such discourses are presented here.

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Introduction

Historically, the dominant paradigm in risk research has been cognitivism. Much of the literature on natural hazards perception and response, therefore, has focussed on individual rationality. People have been assumed to calculate the probability and likely damage of an event; to weigh these against the costs of taking mitigating action; and to base their behavioural decisions on the resulting balance of costs and benefits. The issue tackled by researchers and policymakers has been the question of how to eliminate the 'sub-optimal' elements of these calculations; how to plug the gaps in people's incomplete models of how hazards operate (the *mental models* approach) and how to 'correct' perceptual distortions caused by the use of everyday cognitive shortcuts (heuristics). Only experts, it has been assumed, have a clear and objective view of natural hazards; and they, therefore, have a duty to convey that view to the public and help them behave more responsibly.

This perspective is a seductive one because it indicates straightforward programmes of practical action. If all that is needed to change behaviour is better individual cognition, then the proper course of action is self-evident: people must

be educated and informed – leaflets must be sent out and publicity campaigns must be launched.

That this view has some validity is undeniable. People do make calculations and these calculations are certainly influenced by the depth and scope of information they have at hand. A key shortcoming of this approach, however, is its failure to address the essentially social nature of rationality and understanding. As we know from social construction theory (Berger & Luckmann 1966) and from social representations theory (Moscovici 1961, 1984), the way we understand the world is shaped by the social filter through which we view it. Although information about floods, earthquakes etc has the potential to influence behaviour, it will always first be assimilated into existing, socially determined, structures of understanding.

The more social perspective is not, of course, new. Ever since Mary Douglas and her colleagues published their work on cultural theory (e.g. Douglas & Wildavsky 1982), the this perspective has been influential in risk research. As Rayner (1992) points out, however, the flaw in cultural theory is its essentialism: it seems to assume that an egalitarian is always an egalitarian; that a hierarchist will always be a hierarchist, etc. Like the assumptions of cognitivism, this assumption too is seductive. It holds out the promise of a practical and easily operationalised research tool – a 'personality' measure that can be used to predict risk perception and response. In reality, however, people rarely maintain one attitudinal stance in the manner that cultural theory seems to propose. As Rayner suggests, they tend to flit between various risk-'personalities', making their choice according to the particular social contexts in which risks occur and are debated.

This highlights a crucial question for natural hazards researchers: the question of what determines which risk-'personalities' people adopt for particular risks.

A practical framework for addressing this question is provided by Tajfel & Turner's *social identity theory* (Turner 1984). Like Douglas, the proponents of social identity theory argue that group membership plays an important role in determining behaviour. Unlike cultural theory, however, social identity theory does not assume that the same group membership will determine behaviour in different circumstances. Rather, it allows for a plurality of group memberships and proposes that people will choose the identity that is most salient to the particular set of circumstances in which they find themselves.

The attribution of salience is an important part of the theory, for it allows us to begin to explain the variations in risk response. If we wish to understand why people respond to particular risks as they do, then – the theory suggests – we need to discover which social identities are called into play by each risk and how the content of those identities impact on risk perception and response. That is, we need to know what social representations of the hazard and of the available responses are associated with the social identity; and – more broadly – what risk-discourses are sanctioned within that social identity.

The research

These questions were addressed in research sponsored by the ESRC and the Environment Agency. Looking at the particular case of flooding, the research set out to discover how householders represent flood-risk, how they represent the various possible responses to it and which discourses they employ when talking about it.

The fieldwork for the research was conducted in southern England and involved the application of semi-structured interview schedules to pairs of friends, couples, families, groups of neighbours and individuals – all of whom lived in flood-risk areas and had already been aware of the risk. Interview data was analysed using a discourse analysis technique drawn from the work of the social psychologists Potter & Wetherell (1987) and the linguist Fairclough (2003). A 'discourse' was taken to be:

An ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to physical and social realities, and which is realised through the linguistic features of the text. (Hajer 1995; Fairclough 2003)

Respondents' discourses were reconstructed, therefore, not only from the overt content of their speech, but also by taking into consideration what Fairclough (2003) calls the *texturing* affect of language and what Giddens (1991) calls *practical consciousness* – the subsurface structure of normal social assumptions that makes every-day discursive behaviour possible. This involved looking at respondents' unvoiced, implicit assumptions; at their choices of terms at their framing decisions; and at their rhetorical tactics. This can be described as a form of analytical excavation – an attempt to bring to the analyst's awareness what might not have been conscious for either the interviewer or the respondent.

Conclusions

A detailed analysis conducted on this basis uncovered a number of deeply-embedded discourses and revealed that some of these de-legitimise the very idea of precautionary responses to flood-risk. In this paper, I will consider two of these, which I call the Reactive Discourse and the Blame Discourse.

The primary role of both these discourses, I suggest, concerns the protection of identity. Tajfel and Turner's theory posits that people rely on their social identity to support their own personal self-images; that it gives them a sense of their place in the world. This provides people with a powerful incentive to reinforce their social identities by accentuating, wherever possible, the positive characteristics of their own social groupings (their in-groups) whilst attenuating the positive characteristics of other groups (the out-groups). The function of the Reactive Discourse and the Blame Discourse, I suggest, is to facilitate this process.

The first of these, the Blame Discourse, involves the scape-goating of an external, human agent (an *out-group*), so as to preserve the positive identity of the householders (the *in-group*). If – as often appears to be the case – responsibility for risk-mitigation is taken to follow responsibility for the risk itself, then it is an integral characteristic of this discourse that householders also see it as the *out-group's* responsibility – and not their own – to take any pre-emptive action against the flood-risk. The discourse of household-level pre-emptive is therefore de-legitimised.

The Reactive Discourse, meanwhile, rejects the very idea of pro-active action, representing it as obsessive, abnormal and stigmatising. Reactive behaviour, on the other hand, is represented as dynamic, heroic and enjoyable¹. To experience a flood and react in the teeth of a rising tide of water is seen as self-realising; to purchase sandbags when the sun is shining and there is not a cloud in the sky is represented as farcical. Using the rhetorical tactic of ridicule, those people are derided who take such action or who recommend it. Like the Blame Discourse, therefore, the Reactive Discourse undermines the idea of long-term preventative action.

Both the Blame Discourse and the Reactive Discourse can be seen as instrumentally rational and could, arguably, be assimilated into the cognitivist paradigm. There are two reasons, however, why these findings do not fit easily within the cognitivist paradigm. The first reason is that householders' primary motivation is taken as emotional rather than material. The second, is that what is considered as a 'good' or a 'bad' is taken to be defined by the social in-group rather than by the individual.

The existence and deployment of these two discourses highlights a problem faced by those trying to persuade householders to take measures to protect their homes. As we have seen, taking such measures de-legitimises the part of the Blame Discourse that associates responsibility for action with responsibility for creating the risk, and de-legitimises the part of the Reaction Discourse that rates responding to an event above responding to the risk of an event. If we accept that the continued use of these discourses is an essential condition for membership of some in-groups, then encouraging householders to take mitigating action may be tantamount to asking them to compromise their own social identities and – hence – their sense of place in the world. In terms of their own emotional security, therefore, householders have a strong incentive not to accept the discourse of household-level preparation.

This applies neither to all hazards nor to any one hazard in all circumstances. The data indicates that public authorities are more likely to be perceived as an out-group by working class householders than they are by others. Middle class householders might therefore feel less need to accentuate their own image in

¹ See Lupton & Tulloch (2002) and Lyng (1990) for comparable examples of this phenomenon in other areas of risk.

relation to that of the local authorities and might be more willing to take responsibility for implementing flood-risk mitigation measures. Furthermore, although images of community based responses – both imagined and remembered – appear to be at the core of social representations of flood events, this appears not to be the case for other hazards (such as household fire and burglary). These other hazards are represented as less social than flooding and might, therefore, be less susceptible to social pressures to conform to particular discourses.

Nevertheless, the point remains that social identity can and sometimes does play a key role in shaping responses to risk and that this needs to be taken into account when attempts are made to understand and shape those responses.

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