



ESRC Research Network

Network Co-ordination

Professor Peter Taylor-Gooby
SSPSSR
University of Kent
CT2 7NF
Tel: 01227 827514
p.f.taylor-gooby@kent.ac.uk

Dr Jens Zinn
Tel: 01227 824165
j.zinn@kent.ac.uk

Mary Mustafa
Tel: 01227 827102
m.mustafa@kent.ac.uk

Website

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/scarr>

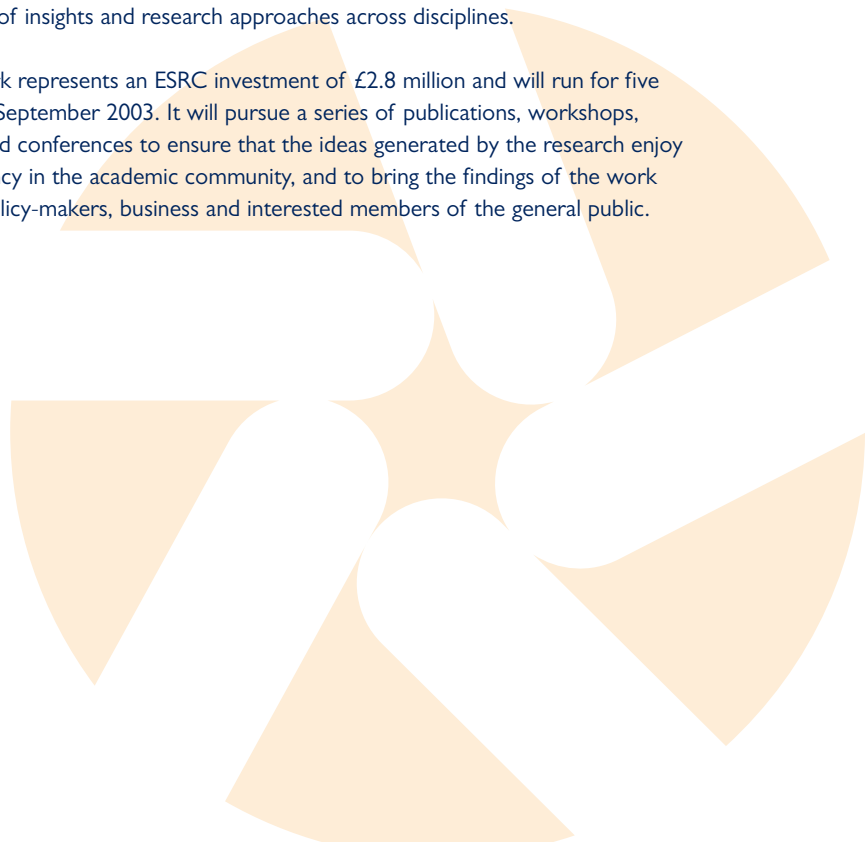
Social Contexts and Responses to Risk

The topic of risk has attracted a great deal of attention from social scientists and public policy-makers in recent years. Rapid shifts in employment patterns and in family life, the impact of new technologies and scientific discoveries and the wider range of opportunities and uncertainties that confront people during the course of their lives all contribute to greater interest in risk. This network brings together economists, sociologists, psychologists, experts on the media, law and on social policy and other social scientists from 14 university departments and research institutes in a range of linked research projects. We will examine perceptions of and responses to risk in a range of areas, including sexual behaviour and partnering choices, pensions and financial planning, industrial pollution, crime, transport and environmental hazards. We will also analyse the role played by media communication and intergenerational learning, ethnic and cultural differences, emotional factors within relationships, and such considerations as environmental impact in influencing how people think about and deal with risk.

The network will contribute to public policy by focusing on risk in everyday life settings rather than the hypothetical contexts to which social science theories sometimes refer. It will also improve the methods used to elicit people's evaluations of risk, so that policy-making is better informed.

The research will enhance academic understanding of how people respond to risk and uncertainty during the course of their lives. It will seek particularly to promote the sharing of insights and research approaches across disciplines.

The network represents an ESRC investment of £2.8 million and will run for five years from September 2003. It will pursue a series of publications, workshops, seminars and conferences to ensure that the ideas generated by the research enjoy wide currency in the academic community, and to bring the findings of the work home to policy-makers, business and interested members of the general public.





Social Contexts and Responses to Risk

- **Family Change, Intimate Relationships and Risk**
- **Risk Perceptions and Responses, and Transitions in the Life-Course**
- **Perceiving and Responding to Risk: The Impact of Difference**
- **Risk and Interpersonal Affect**
- **Media Discourses and Framing**
- **Public Understanding of Regimes of Risk Regulation**
- **Risk in Perspective: Private Choices and Public Decisions**
- **Socio-Technical Risk, Decisions and Values: A Narrative Approach**
- **Towards a Theory of Risk and Risk Response in its Social Contexts**





Risk Perceptions and Responses, and Transitions in the Life Course

Contact

Dr Andreas Cebulla
National Centre for Social
Research
35 Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0AX
Tel: 020 7250 1866
a.cebulla@natcen.ac.uk

Other Researchers

Dr Barbara Dobson
b.m.dobson@lboro.ac.uk

Lynne Murray-Cox
l.a.m.cox@lboro.ac.uk
Centre for Research in Social Policy
Loughborough University

Duration of Research

October 2003 – September 2008

Research Question

This project explores the personal and familial consequences of risk events. It focuses on the responses and behavioural adjustments to risk that people make at different points in their lives, and on the extent to which these might differ between generations.

Life-course studies have shown that risk perceptions and responses are bounded by time and context and are subject to change. Life-course research has paid particular attention to the role of the family in mediating responses to risk and change. The government is broadening university access and establishing new labour market policies such as the New Deal. Experience in both these areas affects risk perceptions and risk-related behaviour. This study will examine the extent to which responses to risk are shaped by personal networks, public institutions and public policy.

Method

- A random probability sample survey of the adult population in England recording perceptions and experiences of different types of risks
- A qualitative study of 30 households recruited from different age groups approximating to critical phases in life-course transitions and taking into account recent exposure to risk events. Interviews will explore risk perceptions and responses. The interviews will be repeated 12 months later to investigate changes in perceptions and responses and the outcomes of previous responses to risk.

Thirty interviews will also be carried out with parents and/or the adult children of participants during the study to explore inter-generational differences in risk perceptions and reactions.

Output

The national survey will enable us to study variations in risk exposure and the incidence of multiple risk exposure among individuals, households and different age groups and generations. The project's qualitative studies will contrast the effect of current and past socialisation regimes on risk perceptions and responses, and the 'transfer' of perceptions across family generations.

Evolving public institutions and policies and changing lifestyles have altered the context in which risk is experienced and risk responses are developed. The study will record these changes and investigate the scope for institutional intervention and risk communication to support individuals' risk management strategies in the future. It will contribute to the development of academic understanding of the processes which influence how people respond to risk, and will be of value to policy-makers in areas such as employment, education and family policy.



Risk and Interpersonal Affect

Contact

Dr Brian Parkinson
Department of Experimental
Psychology
Oxford University
9 South Parks Road
Oxford OX1 3UD
Tel: 01865 271423
brian.parkinson@psy.ox.ac.uk

Duration of Research

October 2004 – September 2008

Research Question

Working out how risky novel situations might be often involves consideration of other people's emotional reactions. For example, research has shown that young infants are far more willing to cross a glass floor covering a large hole when their mothers are smiling at them from the other side. In this project, we focus specifically on how people in close relationships negotiate perceptions of risk, taking each other's emotions into account. Because emotions are usually seen as spontaneous and automatic responses, they often seem to convey direct information about another's perspective. However, to the extent that people actively try to bring their emotions in line with social demands, they may mislead others about how the situation is really being appraised. For instance, when smoke starts to enter a room, the nonchalance affected by people disguising their panic reassures others that there is no real emergency. Our studies attempt to identify situations in which such misinterpretations may occur and to explore their implications for over-caution or over-confidence in risky decisions.

Method

The research will employ a variety of methods. After characterising the risks commonly faced by people sharing relationships using exploratory diary questionnaires and follow-up interviews, we will address the changing emotional perspectives on these risks with time-sampling methodology. In particular, we will focus on the circumstances under which partners' emotional perspectives on commonly faced prospects converge or diverge over time. Closer examination of moment-by-moment inter-personal processes will be achieved by video-recording ongoing conversations about joint risky decisions. Participants will be asked to review the tape and comment on their thoughts and feelings during the original conversations. Again, the focus is on how people's emotional states impact on each other and how they influence the affective context for the joint formulation of risk problems. Finally, controlled laboratory experiments will be used in which the affective states of parties in relation to simulated decisions are manipulated.

Output

This project will extend understanding of the influence of emotion on risk decisions. The results will show how ongoing affective exchanges moderate the impact of rational factors in the consideration of risks. They will also help to suggest strategies for setting an appropriate emotional setting for the realistic appraisal of everyday risks, of relevance to counselling and the understanding of choices made in the contexts of family life.



Media Discourses and Framing

Contact

Professor Jenny Kitzinger
School of Journalism
Media and Cultural Studies
Bute Building
Cardiff University
King Edward VII Avenue
Cardiff CF10 3NB
Tel: 029 2087 4571
kitzingerj@cardiff.ac.uk

Other Researchers

Emma Hughes
hughese@cardiff.ac.uk
School of Journalism
Media & Cultural Studies
Cardiff University

Professor Graham Murdock
g.murdock@lboro.ac.uk
Department of Social Sciences
University of Loughborough

Duration of Research

October 2003 – September 2008

Research Question

The aim of this project is to explore the role of the media in risk debates. This involves complex processes both at the level of media representation and of audience reception. Representing risk involves telling stories, providing context, prompting hopes and fears, invoking images and associations, inviting identification, allocating blame and stimulating the imagination. Our previous research – on coverage of risk and on production factors influencing risk reporting – highlights, but does not resolve, these issues. Parallel work on public understandings has similarly identified the significance of media discourses but failed adequately to theorise the engagement between audiences and texts around risk issues. The project will address these gaps by providing a multi-level analysis of media discourses and their potential influence on public perceptions, focusing on the range of substantive risks addressed by the network. The research will examine:

- The concerns of policy makers, pressure groups and practitioners around media representation of such risks.
- The discourses, framing and narratives used within the media, and across diverse formats, in risk representation.
- How people relate to such diverse representations and how they draw on such discourses and framing in their talk about and response to risks.

Method:

- 1 Consultation interviews with 30 relevant policy makers, pressure groups and practitioners, examining their concerns around media representations.
- 2 Analysis of the coverage of relevant risks across print and electronic media throughout 2004. This will include not only different media (press, magazines, TV) but also a range of genres and formats to allow for comparison of the range of discourses and framings. This archive will be subject to both quantitative and qualitative analysis.
- 3 Analysis of the discourses and framing people employ in discussing risks, and the potential role of the media in influencing such talk. We will conduct 20 focus group sessions, which will include viewing and discussing selected media output, and interviews with about 40 selected participants. The focus groups will allow us to explore how people negotiate risk and media representations of those risks in the social relations within which they are embedded. The interviews will allow us to access individual responses.

Output

This project will contribute to understanding risk communication processes, perceptions, practices and outcomes and will help the other projects in the network set their findings in context. It will contribute to a key area of media studies and risk theory and help to inform policy and strategy in such areas as health education and media advocacy initiatives.



Family Change, Intimate Relationships and Risk

Contact

Professor Jane Lewis
Department of Social Policy
London School of Economics
and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
Tel: 020 7955 7345

Other Researchers

Professor Mavis Maclean
mavis.maclean@wolfson.ox.ac.uk
Centre for Family Law and Policy
University of Oxford

Sophie Sarre
sophie@sophiesarre.eclipse.co.uk
University of Oxford

Duration of Research

October 2003 – September 2008

Research Question

This project examines 'decisions' that people make regarding family life, in particular choice of a particular kind of partnership. Marriage and cohabitation are now choices for people entering heterosexual relationships, and these choices come with different kinds of expectations and notions of risk.

People are affected in different ways by the choices they make in their lives. Men who are married tend to enjoy better health than those who are not, but for women the reverse is true. Mothers are economically less independent than fathers. Cohabitants are not entitled to the tax breaks and pension provisions that are available to married couples.

The research analyses the level of awareness that people have about the risks involved in their decisions and the actions they may take to minimise those risks. Historically, marriage has been conceptualised as 'protection against risk', particularly for women. This may have changed, not least because of the high risk of divorce. Risk, is of course not necessarily associated with 'harm', and we also wish to investigate what people feel they might gain from 'taking a chance', and what makes marriage or cohabitation a risk worth taking.

We will also examine what influences people's perceptions of risk in respect of marriage and cohabitation: information, from different sources, the influence of past experiences, why they see (or don't see) something as likely to happen, whom they hold responsible for protecting them from risk and how they plan for the risks they anticipate.

Empirical research on the family has shown that people do not invariably act rationally to maximise their own utility, as theories of behaviour based on economic approaches sometimes imply. They may not be fully aware of the likely consequences of their actions. They often do not have limitless possibilities to choose from and must therefore 'make do'. They usually take into consideration the vulnerabilities of others, as well as of themselves, when making decisions, together with ideas about 'the proper thing to do'.

The research will also consider how perceptions of risk differ between parents and children, and whether perceptions are different or more intense for parents who work full-time. We are particularly interested in perceptions of risk in respect of sexual behaviour, and will be paying attention to peer group influences on what is acceptable to acknowledge as risk.

>>>



Method

We will interview 30 married and co-habiting couples and 50 teenagers and their parents, identified through the government's Omnibus Survey and the network's own national risk survey.

Output

The research will contribute to our knowledge of the way in which the risks resulting from family change are handled at the individual and household level. The findings will be significant for voluntary agencies and government departments developing policies for marriage and family support and for the prevention of teenage pregnancy, and will contribute to the understanding of risk framing and risk management.





Perceiving and Responding to Risk: The Impact of Difference

Contact

Dr Deborah Quilgars
Senior Research Fellow
Centre for Housing Policy
University of York
YO1 5DD
Tel: 01904 433691
dj1@york.ac.uk

Research Team

Anwen Jones
naj3@york.ac.uk
Centre for Housing Policy
University of York

David Abbott
d.abbott@bristol.ac.uk
Norah Fry Research Centre
University of Bristol

Duration of Research

October 2003 – September 2008

Research Question

This project will examine the extent to which social and cultural differences along the dimensions of disability, sexuality, ethnicity and faith/religion influence responses to financial and economic risk. Previous research has focused largely on white people in employment and on differences between socio-economic groups. There is little systematic examination of the way in which social differences affect the framing of and response to risk at either an individual or theoretical level.

Current policy-making tends to assume that people perceive and respond to financial risks in a uniform and rational way. However, small scale studies indicate that different groups are likely to frame and respond to risks differently as a result of cultural and lifestyle influences and of limitations on their access to the full range of income maintenance and safety-net provisions available to others. The main area of enquiry will be the financial risk associated with being unable to work or losing work and income. The impact of disability, sexuality, ethnicity and faith or religion on the way people think and respond to financial risk will be explored in detail.

Key research questions include:

- Are some events perceived as more certain or more risky by different groups?
- Do ways of thinking about and discussing risk differ between different groups? How are these discourses sustained by the groups?
- How far do key institutions recognize and respond to difference?
- What are the implications for private and public policies designed to address financial risk in relation to different groups among the population?

Method

- 1 Four focus groups will be convened in two areas (Bristol and Leeds) representing each of the four main elements of difference.
- 2 One hundred and twenty in-depth individual interviews will examine how people perceive and respond to the risk of income/job loss. Thirty interviews will be undertaken within each of the main case study groups, with people of prime working age, between 30 and 50.
- 3 In addition, approximately 20 semi-structured interviews with organisations representing the interests of the different groups (pressure and lobbying groups, religious organisations) and 10 interviews with key players in institutions (relevant government departments, insurance companies) will explore risk perceptions and responses at a social group and institutional level.



4 Quantitative data from the National Risk Survey undertaken by the network will be reanalysed to examine differences in perception of risk between the groups.

A Research Advisory Group, representing key users, will be established to help inform the study.

Output

Working papers will be published at the end of each stage of the project as well as a final report and summaries in accessible formats designed specifically for the groups taking part in the project.

The research will improve understanding of differences in perception of and responses to risk among people from different social groups. It will be relevant to labour market and pension and policy-making and to the planning of insurance and other provision against risk.





Public Understanding of Regimes of Risk Regulation

Contact

Dr Peter Lunt
Department of Psychology
University College London
Gower Street
London
WC1E 6BT
Tel: 0207 6795401
p.lunt@ucl.ac.uk

Other Researchers

Professor Sonia Livingstone
s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk
Department of Media and
Communications
London School of Economics and
Political Science

Duration of Research

October 2003 – September 2008

Research Question

New agencies, the Financial Services Authority and the Office of Communications, have been created to manage risks in financial services and the media. Their responsibilities also include research, public education and awareness, engagement with viewer and consumer representatives and influencing the policy process in their respective areas.

These institutional reforms are a response to a changing commercial and cultural context. Privatisation and globalisation have led to a shift from state to co- or self-regulation and individuals are increasingly expected to take responsibility in insuring against welfare risks and in managing internet and media usage for their families.

This project addresses two questions:

- From the regulator's viewpoint, how is the consumer (or citizen, public or viewer) represented, and included in planning? How do other relevant bodies, such as consumer bodies and media commentators understand and represent such policies and activities?
- How do consumers (citizens, publics, viewers) anticipate, represent and plan for the risk context they face in relation to financial and communication decisions? How do people understand the relation between their own activities and the functions and duties of the relevant regulator?

Method

For each of the two case studies (financial services and communications), we will:

- 1 Analyse policy documents and media representations and debates;
- 2 Conduct focus group interviews with consumers and members of the public;
- 3 Conduct interviews with key actors.

Output

The research aims to inform our understanding of public decision-making, providing insight into how policy-makers frame and anticipate public perceptions of risk and public responses (including how the public is directly or indirectly involved in the policy process itself). It will contribute to the analysis of changing perceptions of risk by examining how regulatory regimes are understood by the public and how this in turn frames public understanding of financial and communication risks.

>>>



We are particularly interested in the implications of these questions for communication, trust and decision-making between regulators, private providers and the public, for example, 'the model consumer' – the public as understood by, planned for, and communicated to by regulators – and 'the actual consumer' – the perceptions, interests and activities of individuals facing everyday risks. Although researchers have examined both the changing organisational approaches to the management of risk and individuals' perceptions of risk, there has so far been very little work on the crucial question of their interrelation.





Risk in Perspective: Private Choices and Public Decisions

Contact

Professor Graham Loomes
Department of Economics
University of East Anglia
Norwich NR4 7TJ
Tel: 01603 592099
g.loomes@uea.ac.uk

Other Researchers

Dr Judith Mehta
j.mehta@uea.ac.uk
Centre for the Economic and
Behavioural Analysis of Risk
and Decision
University of East Anglia

Duration of Research

October 2003 – September 2008

Research Question

Within the field of economics, most research on decision-making under risk has focused on behaviour in separate hazard contexts such as transport, food, crime or new technology, and/or on particular institutional ways of managing risk such as insurance markets or the various regulatory regimes. However, studies which ask their respondents to focus on particular risks in isolation from others, rather than in the context of their activities and behaviour, potentially distort the absolute and relative impact of these risks on people's daily lives. There is, moreover, good evidence that the values people assign to different risks may be substantially affected by the scenarios presented to them and by the different ways in which their values are elicited.

This study will investigate the impact of framing and context on decision-making under risk, paying particular attention to how people interpret risky situations. In particular, which features of a risky situation do people find salient to decision-making? Are risks inflated in importance when considered separately rather than in the context of other risks? Why is it that different elicitation procedures generate different evaluations of risk? Are there ways of reducing bias in people's responses? Will some approaches elicit values that are, in some sense, more valid than others?

Method

We will carry out in-depth interviews with individual respondents and households. The interviews will be designed to gather basic information about each household's pattern of expenditure and activities, and to investigate in detail the nature of some of the decisions made, with particular reference to the relative weight given to considerations of risk. For example, in the case of transport risks, we will collect background information about the time and money spent using different forms of transport, and then investigate the reasons for the particular choice of transport mode. The research will examine how perceptions of risk differentials are weighed alongside the other factors that enter into decision-making, including convenience, time-saving, comfort, exercise benefits and environmental concerns.

The first phase of the project will develop the materials and instruments required for such a study. A series of small-scale experiments will be used to refine hypotheses, give insights into the cognitive processes at work in decision-making under risk and identify the appropriate vocabulary and mode of presentation to be used in interviews. We shall then conduct a larger survey specifically aimed at examining how risk reductions are valued when hazards are considered separately or in various combinations: this will provide us with a 'baseline' obtained under more conventional survey conditions, with which to compare the results from our more in-depth study.

>>>



Output

When deciding how to allocate scarce resources, individuals and public bodies alike face multiple objectives and the need to balance risk issues against non-risk considerations. This project is situated at the bridge between individual attitudes and values on the one hand, and social priorities on the other: we hope that our findings will enhance the methods used by researchers to elicit relevant information from individuals and households, and provide policymakers with guidance about the way that such information may usefully be incorporated into public policy. The project will contribute to the goals of greater coherence across public policy and the responsiveness of those policies to people's values.





Socio-Technical Risk, Decisions and Values: A Narrative Approach

Contact

Professor Nick Pidgeon
Centre for Environmental Risk
School of Environmental Sciences
University of East Anglia
Norwich
NR4 7TJ
Tel: 01603 593129
n.pidgeon@uea.ac.uk

Research Team

Peter Simmons
p.simmons@uea.ac.uk

Karen Henwood
k.henwood@uea.ac.uk

Niamh Moore
niamh.moore@uea.ac.uk
University of East Anglia

Duration of Research

September 2003 – October 2008

Project Summary

This project emerges out of a desire to develop innovative methodological and conceptual approaches to understanding experiences of environmental risk in everyday lives. A current challenge in risk research is to develop methods to understand and represent the complex production of values, by publics and stakeholders, in the process of working through decisions around living with and managing risk. Taking a narrative approach, the project will explore values through the stories that people tell about living with risk. In the context of this project, environment is taken to include 'the vulnerable world of everyday life', thus expanding the definition to include the home and the workplace. The project will focus on two contrasting case studies of communities living with sources of significant socio-technical risk to their environments. One will involve a nuclear power station and the other a transport-related source of risk, both issues that are the subject of intense policy interest and debate.

Research Questions

- How does taking a narrative approach contribute to our understanding of the value dimension of risk exposure and to the consideration of those values when making decisions around risk?
- What different patterns of value can be discerned in the two different case studies?
- How do value-frames differ between affected members of the public, formal 'stakeholder' groups and policy-makers?
- In what circumstances do value conflicts result in value trade-offs and in what circumstances is irreducible value incommensurability found?
- What is the significance of different value-frames for the acceptability of behavioural and policy choices?
- What are the implications of different value-frames for communication within and between various groups?

Method

The project will involve a phased, multi-method research design. The methods will include: narrative interviews, some utilising visual elicitation, and narrative analysis; textual analysis of documents; 'Q-methodology' (an approach which links quantitative and qualitative methods); focus groups; and a final experimental phase that will be built on the results of earlier phases of the research, but possibly involving work with narrative vignettes.

>>>



Output

The development of the narrative approach will improve the conceptual and methodological resources available for examining the way people talk about and understand risk. This work will also be applicable in other areas of risk research. Later phases of the research will focus on how a narrative approach may facilitate and enhance deliberation and dialogue between those affected by industrial pollution, the siting of new towns and similar developments and policy-makers. The work will contribute to decision-making in areas which involve balancing competing conceptions of what is at risk.





Towards a Theory of Risk and Risk Response in its Social Contexts

Contact

Professor Peter Taylor-Gooby
SSPSSR
University of Kent
CT2 7NF
Tel: 01227 827514
p.f.taylor-gooby@kent.ac.uk

Other Researchers

Dr Jens Zinn
j.zinn@kent.ac.uk
University of Kent

Duration of Research

October 2003 – September 2008

Research Question

This project will seek to improve understanding of framing processes and of risk discourse among different groups and in a range of different social settings, and to evaluate the contribution of the different disciplinary-based approaches to risk. This work will be directed to answer five questions:

- What influences the framing of different risks by different social groups and institutions, and how do discourses change, paying particular attention to the various social contexts examined?
- How do responses to risk relate to the different discourses?
- How are ideas about risk and the appropriate response communicated between individuals and through media channels?
- How effectively do citizens, stake-holders and regulators communicate, and how best can policy-makers elicit popular ideas about risk and risk priorities?
- What is the role of the various disciplinary-based approaches to risk in improving understanding of the way in which people in different social contexts frame, understand and respond to risk? Can these different approaches be combined or related to each other to improve understanding of risk and risk response across the range of social contexts?

Method

We will produce a series of literature review papers on the contributions of economics, psychology and sociology to the understanding of risk. These will form the basis of discussion at the first round of network meetings and will be developed into a publication at the end of the second year. We will then construct overall frameworks for the comparison of risk framing processes and of risk discourses across the range of settings of increasing generality examined in the projects, from the intimate and personal to broader public policy contexts. We will examine the role of risk communication and its influence on risk discourse and risk response in the various areas. We will also consider the extent to which different framings of risk influence the perceptions of policy-makers and of other stake-holders.

These activities will be directed to the first four research questions listed above. The project will go on to link these accounts together to analyse the approaches which are most successful in providing an account of risk and risk response across the range of settings dealt with in the network. We will also examine the relationship between the various disciplinary-based approaches to risk and consider their appropriateness to understanding risk and risk response in different contexts and among different groups, and the possibilities for cross-disciplinary integration.

>>>



Output

This project will draw together the findings of the other projects in the network and relate them to broader approaches to risk. It will contribute to the analysis of risk and in particular to the promotion of inter-disciplinary work. Academic work on risk has assisted policy-making in a large number of settings. Progress in interdisciplinary linkage will strengthen this contribution.

