'Yelling in the Face of Life': Addressing the Concept of

Risk and Risky Decision Making in Adolescence

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PhD Thesis

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I keep six honest serving-men

(They taught me all I knew);

Their names are What and Why and When

And How and Where and Who.

Kipling, R. (1902) The Elephant's Child.

Dedicated to the memory of my father

Contents

Abstract

By its very nature, the 'Risk Society' has compelled individuals to consider its implications in a self-preserving manner. Although it is acknowledged that such individual concerns are now generated around the world, further discussion should highlight the notion that certain groups of people may feel and perceive these societal forces in different ways. This thesis will initially address the self-definition and identity of young people as risk takers with specific reference to the gender divide. Furthermore, an investigation into the context of risk behaviour during adolescence in relation to the Risk Society is essential, highlighting the positive consequences of this era of insecurities. Finally, the theoretical foundations behind why and how young people make decisions about risk will be analysed. The central theme running through this discussion is the perception of, and the involvement in the use of cannabis. Conclusions will suggest a critical evaluation of initiatives of intervention, which attempt to de-bias decision making, in light of the risk debate. Empirical data, taken from a small-scale school sample, will support where appropriate.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The focus of this current research stems from earlier academic attempts and discussion to classify and distinguish drug 'users' (Hammersley *et al.* 2001). The limitation of such attempts, as proclaimed by the respondents themselves, was that 'just everyone' was doing it (ecstasy users in particular, see Ditton 2001), and that their reasoning was extremely varied. Therefore rather than classification by activity, demography or deviancy, an alternative umbrella concept of risk may be applied. However, rather than following the lead of contemporary criminal justice debate and use risk as a means of assessment and marker of identification, risk is used in this discussion to support behaviour rather than as a means of preventing it.

It was anticipated that such a direction could not be readily applied to the drugs dialogue without full appreciation of its associated problems. Just as deliberation in crime and deviance sparks debate on definition and application, so too does the utilisation of the concept of risk. In many respects this thesis covers familiar ground. However it is necessary to re-interpret many previously made conclusions in light of this new direction.

Acknowledging that the breadth of the risk discipline is ever increasing, some focus had to be aligned to this work. Thus the heart of this study was limited by the classification of 'youth'.[1] As Davis (1999) notes, such a group constitute a significant proportion of the population and more importantly they are our future. Furthermore as a society, she suggests, we tend to see the problems with youth as problems with age: temporal, ephemeral and transient. The blame therefore for 'unacceptable' behaviour continues to

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[1] Or adolescents/young people as are referred to interchangeably throughout the thesis to avoid monotony.

derive its meaning from the idea that 'they'll grow out of it'. In recent years academics have begun to acknowledge that such an explanation is outdated. Risky behaviour is not a product of age but a product of social conditions. Using the sociology of risk as a framework for re-investigating young people and drug use seemed plausible based on the wealth of previous research and the current risk-chic climate. An intensive review of the literature ensued with the three signifiers: risk, drugs and young people at the forefront of the investigation.

After initial attempts to subject this work to an in depth analysis of varied drug use, a narrow focus on the conditions of cannabis related risk decisions was selected. Such a focus was entrenched within a variety of other risk decision making endeavours to elicit comparisons and aid conclusions.

Consequently the scope of this research focuses on the context in which such decisions are made. The Risk Society and theorists of late modernity (Beck 1992, Giddens 1990, 1991) provide one contextual explanation for why young people engage with the concept of risk. The social world of the adolescent, as investigated by this research, provides another such context. It is suggested that the two are explicitly linked. Throughout this thesis the emphasis is placed on the social construction, understanding and utilisation of this concept rather than claims to explain the reasons for participation in specific behaviours. The thoughts, opinions and perceptions of young people towards the behaviour of their social group are noted as paramount. Such a focus is justified through an alignment with methods of intervention. This postmodern theoretical starting point weaves as a continual thread throughout this work. Specific attention is therefore paid to contextualisation, the investigation of meaning, the consideration of influence and the acceptance of diversity.

This approach does not then claim to produce succinct risk factors which can be used to predict involvement in risky behaviour. Conversely such a conclusion works in contrast with the spirit of postmodernism. Thus an investigation of the concept of risk citing meaning and understanding, an analysis of perceptions of risk behaviours, and the exploration of the ways in which risky decisions are socially constructed provide more appropriate benchmarks.

Once the topic area and philosophical underpinnings had been clearly constructed the initial structure of the work followed the identification of four broad research questions.

- How do young people define and conceptualise risk? (Chapter Four)
- Under what conditions are decisions involving risk made? (Chapters Five and Six)
- What specific factors bias such decisions? (Chapters Seven and Eight)
- What are the implications of this analysis? (Chapter Nine)

Each of the research questions are addressed in turn throughout this thesis and embedded in six specifically focused chapters. Firstly Chapter Two sets the scene with a discussion addressing; what is risk? Such a starting point is imperative before it can be applied to social groups or specific activities.

Using the 'risk model' (Davis 1999) as a backdrop, this research conducted a small-scale school study incorporating questionnaires and focus groups for young people aged 13 to 18 (focus groups 14-16) during 2003/2004. One secondary school was selected for the research due to ease of access there. After two pilot studies, and collection of consent forms, Phase I of the data collection selected a sample of 212 (151 final total) students for administration of questionnaires. The design centred around five vignettes based upon five features of risky decision making derived from the literature. After

preliminary analysis of the survey data focus group schedules were created. Phase II therefore consisted of eight mixed sex focus groups, each with five or six respondents taking part. Although the limitations of such a small sample and population are acknowledged, the exploratory nature of the research design supports this methodology. Rather than providing conclusions solely based on the empirical work, the data collected from this research aimed to corroborate the theoretical base on which this thesis developed. The detailed methodology of this research is found in Chapter Three.

This discussion then turns to the empirical data that allowed the respondents of this research to define risk on their own terms. In Chapter Four conclusions are presented with specific reference to discrepancies between genders, and comparisons made to highlight the notion of context. A working description of risk is provided here and expanded throughout the remaining chapters.

Once the context of adolescent risk taking had been established it was necessary to ground these assumptions in those social conditions mentioned by Davis (1999). Chapter Five continues to outline the development and characteristics of the Risk Society and the impact on young people as a distinct social group. The Risk Society as described by Beck, and the conditions of late modernity as illustrated by Giddens, are the foundation for this discussion. Although the differences between these authors are noted, the phrase 'Risk Society' is applied throughout this thesis to account for the social conditions described in this chapter. However as society has continued to evolve since the publication of these texts, some of the characteristics of postmodernism are also found to be applicable. In the 21st century the conditions of the Risk Society are still apparent and, one could claim, are witnessed with increasing intensity. In addition the diversity and fluidity of postmodern discourse on contemporary society must also be

used to supplement the discussions surrounding risk. This chapter centres on the purposeful nature of risk taking and the affirmation of the self. Here the links to drug use are made as one example of self defining risk taking.

Chapter Six looks in detail at the psychological reasoning behind engaging in risky behaviour, presented as a selection of dichotomous arguments. The link between this chapter and the one preceding it is the functional aspect of risk taking. The discussion in Chapter Five highlighted how taking risks not only allowed young people to cope with contemporary society, but also contributed to the development of their identity. In addition, Chapter Six signals the portrayal of the risk taking image, the normalisation of risk engagement and introduces the processes of decision making. By comparing perceptions of risk and associated factors to self reported prevalence data, the findings prompt conclusions surrounding the functional or problematic overtones of participation in risk.

Chapters Seven and Eight turn to focus in detail on how decisions about risk are made. If it is known why the risk taking occurs and the possible by products of such activity, it is important to understand how the subjects decide which risks to choose and which to avoid. The framework for this discussion is the heuristic base of human judgement. From the literature five factors were identified as paramount to adolescent decision making. Each factor was tested via quantitative and qualitative analysis to support their inclusion. Many of the factors biasing human judgments are only thought to operate when attempting to avoid the negative outcomes of the risk. Many such biases have not been related to voluntary/functional risks. Even the fathers of relevant academic inquiry, Tversky and Kahneman, do not acknowledge such a link. Therefore, as

voluntary risk taking is now of paramount concern in everyday life, this notion is specifically addressed here.

The use of both structure and agency as factors influencing adolescent risk taking is acknowledged. Primarily the Risk Society offers structural pushes into the need for risk taking endeavours. However the decision to engage in risk uses a range of agent based (self) and structurally influenced (other agents) tools. Thus a divide was created between those factors specific to the personality of the individual and those that stem from their social environment. Chapter Seven looks in detail at the biases of judgment embedded in 'optimism', 'experience' and 'knowledge'. Empirical data is used throughout to support their selection as relevant factors.

The role of the peer group is quite distinct from the role of the parent. Peer influence has been heralded as one of the most influential factors in adolescent behaviour yet the Risk Society stresses individual accountability and the decline of collective action as having more significance. Although it is believed that parental and peer influence is made up of the self-related biases noted above, specific attention is paid to the 'role of the other' in Chapter Eight. Again empirical data is used throughout to support the inclusion of these influences.

Whilst an appreciation of risk taking is facilitated via the analysis of the Risk Society, without a clear understanding of the mechanics of decision making, intervention itself may be dysfunctional and problematic for young people. In addition, it has been suggested that to simply emphasise risk taking can be problematic if not tackled alongside possible solutions (Davis 1999:16). Therefore the conclusions gained from this work hope to offer some recommendations for managing risky behaviour. By

understanding the risk model and the mechanics of heuristic judgements methods of intervention and specifically education may ultimately benefit. The particular focus on the use of cannabis re-addresses the issues of functional and controlled risk taking with an eye on the individual and the affirmation of the self. Chapter Nine attempts to discuss and bind together all of the above as suggestions for future strategies of intervention.

Although the strength of association between the five biases of judgement is not analysed, their inclusion as relevant markers taken from the literature is supported. In addition, the ideology of drugs education, used as a focus here, should change accordingly. Diversity, management, function, emotion, optimism and alternative 'lived' knowledge have been identified as central to the education of adolescent risk behaviour. It is acknowledged that to tackle decision making as the foundation of such behaviour may be the way forward.

Future research should attempt to create a solid link between the negotiation of risk by young people and the structural and agency-based biases which have been found to influence their behaviour. Although the reliability of any findings generated from a sample this small is always open to question, the thus generated understandings related to risk may well have some applicability to other groups and other activities.

Investigating Risk Definitions

> Criminology and risk analysis are linked conceptually by the fact that both are concerned with classes of hazard, a very broad topic which has been divided in a variety of ways, but with little theoretical coherence.

<div align="right">Short (1984: 714)</div>

When proceeding with research in any field, however broad or narrow, it is imperative to define and fully understand key terms, preferably before embarking on any fieldwork. It is beneficial to the study in hand that a large array of relevant previous research exists. However, fully understanding and researching all that the risk field has to offer is certainly a challenge. The term risk is applied to many diverse areas, often differing in basic definition. Giddens' (1990) work is littered with definitions due in part to his pioneering thoughts and fluidity of discussion. This chapter, and those that succeed, follow this lead and attempt to set the scene through the mechanisms of definition and context. A broad analysis of the use of the term and related terms will be presented and a clear working description identified.

2.0. Definitions

The term 'risk', and all that it encompasses, is in some ways comparable to the term 'crime'. There are multiple definitions of both terms, all with equal validity. Both terms can be applied to numerous different fields, for example the individual agent, society as a whole, the environment, business and employment. Both terms have inspired considerable debate and investigation and both can be measured scientifically. Although the study of crime has been blessed with an 'ology', the risk discipline has yet to be so elevated. However, crime is a noun, 'taking drugs is a crime', it is a 'thing', it

'occurs'. The problem with understanding the concept of risk is that the term arises in many forms. It is also a noun, 'taking drugs is a *risk*; a verb 'he is *risking* everything': and an adjective 'drinking alcohol is *riskier* than smoking cannabis'. Risk is also apparent on two levels: as an actual consequence, and as an individual's appraisal and perception of a situation (Freixanet 1991: 1087).

In addition to this complexity there are many words which are used interchangeably with the term risk. The following section outlines the overlaps between the terms risk, danger, harm, and hazard. Examples are taken from a range of fields spanning the environment, technology, traffic, children and health. Other associated commonalities are loss, probability/chance/possibility or potential/likelihood or expectation/perception, catastrophe, control and adversity. The overlaps with the other identified terms are shown in bold throughout this analysis.

2.01. Risk

Probably originating from the Spanish maritime word meaning 'to run into **danger** on a rock', the term risk first appeared in England in the seventeenth century (Giddens 1990:30), and was primarily used in association with gambling (Parton 1996 in Kempshall 1999: 37). Furthermore historians also relate the traditional use of the term to the religious notion of sin and an explanation of misfortune (Luhmann 1993: 8). Originating as a unbiased term, the Oxford Dictionary now defines risk as 'the **possibility** of meeting **danger** or to suffer **harm** or **loss**', and the Royal Society Study Group present their definition as 'the **probability** that a particular **adverse** event occurs during a stated period of time, or results from a particular challenge' (Report of a Royal Society Study Group 1992:2 in Kempshall 1999: 37).

Adams' description of risk is well observed and highlights these concepts as a mathematical calculation.

> a numerical measure of **expected harm** or **loss** associated with an **adverse** event...the integrated product of risk and **harm** is often expressed in terms such as cost in pounds, **loss** in expected years of life or **loss** of productivity

(Adams 1995: 8)

To provide an example of this mathematical application in relation to road traffic accidents the following is noted.

> the term risk-taking is used to indicate a behaviour that places the individual at a high statistical **chance** of experiencing an undesirable outcome. This term does not imply any particular motivation on the part of the actor. The term "statistical risk" is used to refer to risk measured by a high actuarial **probability** of mortality, morbidity, and/or property **loss**

(Cvetkovich & Earle 1988: 9)

In scientific or mathematical risk analysis actual risk, expressed in terms of probability, is frequently used. In lay terms, such an analysis is not easily accessible and in such dialogue the notion of probability is often replaced by the term 'possibility' when dealing with appraised expectations or perceptions.

> To recognise the existence of a risk or set of risks is to accept not just the **possibility** that things might go wrong, but that this **possibility** cannot be eliminated.

(Giddens 1990: 111)

In addition whilst the mathematical analyst may spend their hours calculating statistical risk avoidance, individuals have a perceived knowledge of the risks involved, and may even deliberately engage in an activity for primarily for the thrills (Harre 2000: 207).

Many studies of risk have linked risk to the notion of a hazard by referring to it as 'the **perceived catastrophic potential** of the **hazard** and also the **perceived** lack of **control** over the situation [coupled with] the unknown character of the hazard and the number of people **possibly** affected' (Bouyer *et al.* 2001: 457). Here the idea of control becomes central to issues surrounding risk perception.

> The word 'happen' is also a clue to our deep concerns about risk, because it indicates that's events are out of our **control**
>
> (Anderson 1998: 1)

This notion of perception or likelihood is commonly observed in real world application. When applying risk to specific fields we also see that the nature of perceived outcomes can change the way the concept is used. The researcher Bob Hughes, speaking to the Scottish charity Wild Things (2004), makes the following comment in relation to young children.

> All children will take risks if they are not stopped from doing so. Encountering and overcoming risk is a normal part of a child's day-to-day life. However, the **perceived** nature of those risks will be less or more extreme depending on the previous experience and current perceptions of the child. Whether it involves jumping from a foot-high step, propelling a wheelchair at speed down a ramp, climbing a high tree or riding a bike on the parapet of a bridge, children will engage in risk. It is in the tradition of explorers and scientists that as a species we should; but all too frequently now, (take risks). children are stopped from undertaking risky activities, unless they are **perceived** by adults as safe. In reality they cannot be both safe and risky. If risk is to be real and not an illusion, it has to have a real element of **potential** physical **harm** attached to it. That means if the child does not concentrate or if the activity outstretches his or her abilities, someone could get hurt; this is essential knowledge for life.

In relation to health and safety of electrical systems the following definition is also provided (Phillipson 2004: 1).

> A risk is the **likelihood** that **harm** may result, taking account of both frequency and severity. The risk can range from the trivial (a paper cut) to **catastrophic** (multiple deaths/mass ill health). The number of people affected will also affect the degree of risk, known as the risk rating. Training, supervision, planning, and safety procedures also have to be taken into account.

One of the fields of research for which risk is an essential concern is health. In a study of anxiety, Bouyer *et al.* define risk as the '**possibility** of being seriously ill, wounded or dying' (2001: 459). Working exclusively with adolescents Thuen *et al.* note

> The term 'risk taking' is often used in a broad sense, including all kinds of behaviours which increase the **likelihood** of mortality, morbidity or injury to the subject responsible for the behaviour

(1992: 269)

These two strands of risk (actual and appraised) need to be further separated into those voluntarily engaged in and those involuntarily subjected to. This discussion provides acknowledgement of both dimensions. Furthermore, this distinction can be applied to the term danger.

2.02. Danger

The occurrence of the term danger is abundant in risk literature. Giddens notes that risk and danger have similar features, where danger aids definitions of risk, but are not the same.

> Danger exists in circumstances of **risk.**

> What **risk** presumes is precisely danger (not necessarily awareness of danger). A person who **risks** something courts danger, where danger is understood as a threat to desired outcomes.

(1990: 32)

However, this is not to confuse **risk** with danger or what some professionals call **'hazard'**. Risk is something children recognise. They are aware or conscious of it. It is something they know they are entering into, like consciously climbing higher, swinging faster or balancing more precariously. Danger on the other hand, is inaccessible to a child. Pollution and poison are danger. High-tension cables are dangers. Rotting timber is a danger. Radioactivity is a danger. Dog excrement is a danger

(Hughes 2004: 1)

Danger is a state or situation which is the product of a **hazard** and the associated **risk**. An illustration of the difference between danger and **risk** is illustrated by the following: Where there are high voltage electrical conductors, there is a permanent danger of electrocution; however, the **risk** of electrocution to persons in close proximity to the conductors would vary, for example between a competent electrician and a young child.

(Phillipson 2004: 1)

Rather than relying on aspects of likelihood, danger is observed as the state or situation in which one is placed.

2.03. Harm

The possible outcomes of risk, as noted above, differ based on the field of reference. The term harm is often applied to a negative outcome of engaging in or being subjected to risk.

Harm represents physical injury, death, ill health, property and equipment damage or any other form of associated **loss**.

(Phillipson 2004: 1)

The event involved in producing the **possibility** of **danger** or **harm**, as above, is principally termed a 'hazard', where a hazard is generally defined as a threat to people and what they value (Furedi 1998: 17).

> A hazard is something with the **potential** to cause **harm**. This can be substances, machines, methods of work, electricity etc

(Phillipson 2004: 1)

Further comment on the use of the term hazard is found in the opening quote when applied to aspects of criminology. It is therefore suggested that car theft or burglary are hazards as they have the potential to cause harm, but harm is not necessarily a physical consequence.

2.05. Risk Descriptions in Application

Based on this analysis can a working description of risk taken from this discussion now be constructed? Such a description must acknowledge those key features identified in bold. Accordingly:

> *A risk is a specific event (undertaken or subjected to), where under certain conditions (e.g. time, control, number of people involved), the probability of a negative outcome from a specific hazard/danger (e.g. electricity) is not known with certainty. Outcomes are expressed in terms of harm or loss.*

What also becomes apparent is that not only do we seek to define risk but in all situations definitions must be guided by context. Douglas & Wildavsky (1982)

explicitly state that risk and danger are socially and culturally constructed, and decisions of measurement and priority say more about the cultural context than about the risks themselves (Boyne 2003: 106). For example Adams (1995) notes that the cost and benefits of walking on ice are perceived differently for children and the elderly; for one a fall would be fun, for the other, fatal. Differences in context also polarise risk into positive and negative connotations, and into desirable and undesirable consequences (Kempshall 1999: 35). The term is now more commonly affiliated with possible adverse effects. However Short (1894: 711) argues that the definition of risk need not be negative in 'a more neutral definition simply specifies that risk is the probability of some future event'. This then allows for context specificity to be acknowledged.

On the basis of the above, the initial description is refined as follows:

A risk is a specific event (undertaken or subjected to), where under certain conditions (e.g. time, control, number of people involved), **the probability of any outcome (positive or negative)** *from a specific hazard/danger (e.g. electricity) is not known with certainty. Any* **negative outcomes** *are expressed in terms of harm or loss.*

If we are to move away then from the primary concern with negative outcomes, more research is necessary into how positive consequences may be described. In forthcoming chapters such a product will be described in terms of functions and related specifically to the societal context of young risk takers. Further discussion will also address in detail each of these points from the perspective of the individual decision maker.

To conclude this preliminary discussion it is apparent that the problems of multiple definitions may lead understandably to confusion. As Coomber (1999: 87) states 'that what is considered to be a risk issue often has more to do with morality, politics, and fear is well stated', thus adding more defining terms to this discussion. Concepts of risk are at the very least relative and temporal (Stanton & Burns 2003: 193) and can therefore cause problems. However the search for such an absolute is not necessary under the conditions of postmodernism. There are those that accept such a notion and view risk as 'ephemeral, contingent and merely a present form of cultural variation' (Boyne 2003: 106). Therefore a relative definition is sought for each diverse subject and applied accordingly. One adverse consequence of such a fluid debate is the need for constant re-examination. There is a feeling that as the literature on risk increases, so does it's impact on society.

> By turning risk into an autonomous, omnipresent force in this way, we transform every human experience into a safety situation.

(Furedi 1998: 4)

Following a similar thread to Furedi, Davis (1999: 16) notes that to simply emphasise risk can be problematic if not tackled alongside possible solutions. This thesis acknowledges that no absolute definition of risk is possible in such a climate, and a contextualised description is provided instead. In order to detract from the sense of omnipotence described here this discussion does not dwell on the negatives of the risks under consideration, nor does it highlight involvement in risk by young people without offering some comment on methods of help and intervention.

Confusion and debate in risk research divides two very opposing schools of thought: those grounding risk in actual technical, scientific calculations, probabilities and prescribed risk assessment, and those who acknowledge its social and cultural fluidity and relativity, and overtly appraised framework. Its chameleon-like ability to merge its appearance with terms such as danger, hazard, harm, and fear also raises issues of definition. Are we addressing different concepts or simply extending our risk vernacular? The use of language has played a major part in the definition of risk – when we use the term risk it is often in the context of negative outcomes – when we say 'consider the risks' of smoking or speeding for example, what we are actually conveying is 'consider the adverse consequences', 'think about the worst that could happen'. In fact the term risk should convey a neutral judgment of the probability of a future event; the acknowledgement that risk is a cost versus benefit consideration.

This research suggests that such diversity between key terms could be used as a valuable research tool. This conclusion was incorporated into the empirical research used to support this thesis. In order to investigate the nature and definitions of risk taking in a sample of 12-18 year olds, this work included a number of indirect risk indicators in the methdology, alongside the overt use of the word 'risk'. These additional markers sought to evoke, for example, responses highlighting different outcomes, positive and negative connotations, levels of concern, and diverse situations of danger. A detailed methodology follows in the next chapter. The results presented in Chapter Four provide interesting comparative conclusions in addition to a richer sense of the pressures faced by young people today (Chapter Five).

2.1. Risk Definitions Within the Context of Young Peoples Lives

This discussion has outlined the search for actual risk assessment by mathematicians and the mechanisms used by the rest of society. Some comment must now be passed to ground such thoughts in the context of the subjects under investigation. The application of the term risk to young people is primarily via their active engagement in certain behaviours and the susceptibility of their age. So what is it that they do which makes them so appropriate for this concept? The following is a brief discussion of some of the ways in which risk is related to young people. It must be noted here that these are the reflections of a wider audience, complied by researchers and policy advisors under their own remits. The young people themselves may not necessarily regard such behaviours as risks. This point will be returned to and investigated in Chapter Four

The law categorises certain activities by means of age restriction. The boundaries of youth and adult are set by 'status offences' (Pearson 1994 in Croall 1998: 118), activities that are permitted for adults but illegal for young people to participate in. Thus, the amount of risks available to young people are always higher, so for them risk taking opportunities are simply greater than for adults. Drinking alcohol may be risky for the health of an adult, but poses greater risk for the adolescent who is also prohibited from drinking it. Young people also tend to be more visible than adults (Croall *ibid.*). They socialise in public places, having limited private space of their own, and often in large groups. Croall (*ibid.*) also states that 'young people lack the skills and experience needed for some types of crime ... lack of technological expertise and experience may also make them less competent criminals and more likely to get caught'. Therefore the chance of detecting risk taking behaviour, either criminal or non-criminal, is intensified. Furthermore it is suggested that young people who engage in one type of risky

behaviour are likely to engage in a variety of others. It is for this reason that many researchers focus their attention on multiple item psychometric analysis.[1]

The above conclusions lead us somewhat distortedly to assume that risk taking is predominantly the prerogative of young people. What needs careful consideration is whether young people are more risk taking *per se*, or whether some activities simply carry a higher level of risk or higher chance of detection than others. Some examples of the types of adolescent behaviours that are considered 'risky' or 'problematic' by adults and warrant academic inquiry are discussed below. As highlighted, not only is the involvement in actual behaviour considered, but also so too are factors affecting risk perception.

2.11. Drug Use

Findings from the 2002/2003 British Crime Survey show that in the last year, 24.6% of 16-19 year olds had used cannabis, 4.2% amyl nitrate, and 4.0% had used ecstasy. In 2002, MORI found that among 11-16 year old school children cannabis was the most commonly offered and tried drug (22%, 14%). Furthermore 4% admitted using solvents, 2% ecstasy and 1% heroin. Almost half of Britain's adolescents are predicted to have tried illegal drugs, and by age18 1 in 5 become recreational drug users (Aldridge *et al.* 2001: 51). Trying drugs for the first time is most likely to occur in adolescence, and the drug of choice is predominantly cannabis (Parker et *al.* 1998: 125). As age increases the proportion of those who have experimented with cannabis also increases, for example, in France, from 13.8% among 13-14 year olds to 64.5% among 17 and 18

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[1] For examples of research done into multiple risk behaviours in adolescence see Alexander *et al.* (1990), Thuen et *al.* (1992), Benthin et *al.* (1993, 1995), Rosenthal (1995), Smith (1995), Denscombe (2001a, 2001b) Hampson et *al.* (2001: 168), Parker & Fischhoff (2003) and Byrnes (2003:14).

year olds (Beck 2001, in EMCDDA 2003). These results have been mirrored in Britain (MORI 2002).

American research has charted the relationship between perceived risk and marijuana use (Fishbein 2003). Marijuana use has been shown to be inversely correlated with perception of risk since 1975, and rates of perceived risk started to drop in 1991, a year before use started to increase. These patterns have not been influenced by a relatively stable measure of availability (*ibid.*). Although the author cautiously attempts to deduce causation for these results, the hypothesis of the popularity of role models (both highlighting positive and negative consequences of drug use) provides interesting reading.

2.12. Alcohol Use

The MORI Youth Survey found that in 2002, 78% of school children had tried alcohol, and prevalence increased with age, with the age of onset being 10 years old. A recent European study of 13-19 year olds found that the amount of money spent on alcohol each weekend far outweighed that spent on any other drug, and more importantly than that spent on any other recreational activity (e.g. cinemas, discos, mobile phones, etc.) (Calafat *et al.* 2003 in EMCDDA 2003).

Hampson *et al.* (2001: 167) found that in high school students (mean age 16.1) 'sensation seeking, ego control, achievement and independence were indirectly associated with alcohol related activities through perceived benefits and risks'. In support, Donohew *et al.* (2000: 1080) concludes that 'sensation seeking plays a crucial role in both the susceptibility to drug and alcohol use'. Lundborg & Lindgren's (2002)

study of 12-18 year old Swedish adolescents found that the perceived risk of becoming an alcoholic was 'substantially overestimated' by young people (similar results are found with smokers mortality estimations, see Vigili *et al.* 1991). A study by Coleman & Cater (2005) found that among their sample of 14-17 year olds, alcohol use served many positive functions. For example, to forget anxieties, to relieve boredom, for excitement (a 'buzz') or to increase assurances in social and sexual circumstances. In addition getting drunk was accepted as normal behaviour. In relation to negative outcomes the sample cited health related (e.g. ill effects or injuries via intoxication) as the most common occurrence, followed by threats to personal safety (e.g. walking alone at night and getting in to cars knowing the driver was drunk) and involvement with the police (e.g. drinking on the streets, vandalism). It was also noted that as age increased the perception of risk decreased, and this was attributed to the protection offered by licensed premises.

2.13. Smoking

Denscombe (2001a: 157) notes that 'by age 15, one third of girls are regular smokers as are 28% of boys, and is representative of a substantial increase in teenage smoking in the last ten years'. He equates a number of factors influencing young people to take up smoking; peer pressure, invulnerability; stress relief, addiction, susceptibility to advertising, home influence, low self esteem and enjoyment. Milam *et al.* (2000: 71) found that among high school students (mean age 16.7) smokers were less likely than non-smokers to report feeling invulnerable to both smoking and non-smoking related health risks, presented in contrast to many commonly held assumptions. Vigili *et al.* (1991: 315 *in ibid.*) concluded that high school smokers (mean age 15) perceive less personal risk, less severe health consequences, and greater benefits relative to risks.

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They also found it more difficult to picture harmful consequences to themselves, and perceived smoking to be less avoidable. It is also believed that a young person's perception of the risks of smoking declines with age, perhaps because the risk is not the health outcome but the fear of punishment (Anderson *et al.* 1993: 168 in Bell 1993). This hypothesis could be applied to all of the referenced activities.

All the above activities usually fall under the domain of 'substance use. It is widely suggested that many of the behaviours labelled as substance use are intercorrelated (Fishbein 2003: 58). Evidence shows that each substance occurs at different stages of involvement: namely tobacco and alcohol come first (although there is no significant evidence to predict in which order, Hornik 2003: 342), followed by marijuana, then any number of other illicit drugs (Fishbein 2003: 58). Marijuana use is rarely found without the use of tobacco, and to a lesser extent alcohol (Hornik 2003: 335). Research also suggests that the use of illicit drugs can also be linked to general deviancy (Fishbein 2003: 62).

2.14. Unprotected Sex

Risky sex not only involves the risk of pregnancy but also the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. In a 1986 survey of 16-19 year olds, only 15% said they changed their sexual behaviour because of concern about AIDS (Benthin *et al.* 1993: 154). Arnett (1990) found that amongst females, sex without contraception was significantly related to sensation seeking and egocentrism. Likewise Donohew *et al.* (2000) found strong associations between sexually active students and sensation seeking and impulsive decision making. It was also suggested that impulsive decision-making is related to the use of alcohol or marijuana before sex. Bon (2001), in a study of

American college students, found that respondents perceived that the average college student engaged in significantly more frequent HIV-risky sexual behaviour than themselves (*ibid.*: 174). This observation of risk perception is noted as a 'cognitive coping strategy designed to minimise personal threat' (*ibid.*).

2.15. Driving

Practicing risky driving has been defined as 'behaviour immediately preceding the accident and that probably contributed to the accident' (Junger 2001: 442). American statistics show that adolescents are the only group for which morbidity from traffic accidents has increased since 1960, resulting in it being the leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds (Benthim *et al.*1993, Hampson *et al.* 2001, Bingham & Shope 2004). Cvetkovich *et al.*'s (1988) study of young drivers, and their concept of risk noted that 'driving is a much more hazardous activity for the young' and 'sixteen year olds have ten times the fatal crash rate of 30 year olds'. Adolescent drivers are also more likely to engage in speeding, failing to wear a seatbelt, tailgating, reckless driving, and driving under the influence of alcohol (Harre 2001: 206). In addition Bingham & Shope (2004) found research to associate inexperience, anger or depression (emotion), risky-driving practice and attitude, thrill seeking, personality factors and substance use as predictors of risky driving.

While some have argued that their use of the term 'risk taking' simply describes a measurable behaviour that increases the chance of a crash (Cvetkovich *et al.* 1988, Jonah 1986), others have suggested that risk taking inherently implies a conscious knowledge of the risks involved (Irwin & Millstein 1992, Yates 1992). Cvetkovich *et al.* concluded that 'young drivers rate the statistical risk of driving in general as being

higher than older drivers' (1988: 15). This finding could be due to the thrill seeking aspect of adolescent risk taking. It is noted that statistics claim that using a seatbelt reduces the chances of a fatal injury by about 83% for drivers and about 80% for front seat passengers (Hurst 1979 in Adams 1995: 113). However, not using a seatbelt is seen as a thrill seeking action for adolescents (Benthin *et al.* 1995).

2.16. Truancy

MORI (2002: 51) recorded 24% of respondents aged 11-16 as having ever played truant during 2002. Truancy tended to start at an early age, and the majority of those who had, had done so by Year 9 (age 14/15). As with many of the other activities cited, young people are said to believe that truancy is acceptable behaviour (Jones & Francis 1994: 225). There are many sociological factors (such as large families, broken homes, death of a parent etc) and psychological factors (such as intelligence, self-esteem, school performance etc) which have been significantly related to absenteeism from school (*ibid.*). MORI (2002: 52) found that the reasons for truanting were similar to those given for offending behaviour, boredom or influence of older peers. There was also found to be a direct link between truancy and offending with 65% of truants having also committed an offence.

2.17. Criminal Behaviour

Risk behaviours congruent with adolescence also include criminal acts. Although drug use, smoking and alcohol use may be illegal for young people, these acts are more commonly associated with health related risks. For many the involvement in petty criminal activity is also a product of experimentation. However it must be

acknowledged that for some it is the start of a long and prosperous criminal career. In their 1994 publication Anderson *et al.* (in Croall 1998: 126) found that just over third of respondents had shoplifted, 15% had committed assault and 14% vandalism, 5% car theft, 3% housebreaking, and 2% mugging. In 2002 (MORI) figures showed that the 15-16 year old male was the most likely culprit, with 26% of those attending school admitting committing an offence in the last 12 months. Of those who had offended, 54% admitted stealing, 41% assault, 46% fare dodging and 34% graffiti (MORI 2002). In 2003, the Home Office figures showed that 29% of a sample of young people aged 10-25 had committed at least one act of antisocial behaviour in the previous year, with the most likely age group being 14-16 followed by 17-19year olds (Hayward & Sharp 2003).

This discussion has provided an initial insight into the concept of risk provided by academics, researchers and practitioners. We find that the use of the term is complex. In addition there are many activities labelled as risky by such groups that may or may not be recognised as such by young people themselves. Many of these activities will be investigated by the empirical work of this thesis to highlight these contextual differences. However the decision was taken to provide some specific focus to the study.

2.2. Risk Definitions, Young People and Cannabis Use

Following an investigation into the types of activity engaged in by young people this research attempts to narrow the focus to experimentation in cannabis use as a risky act. The context of such a decision is presented here. Recent academic discourse has challenged the definition and context of drug use specifically in relation to deviant

25

labels and the specifics of 'drug using' terminology (Hammersley *et al.* 2001). As the cited authors note, to classify such activities with static discourse negates the reflexive and ephemeral context of contemporary drug users. No longer are dichotomous (users/non-users) or trichotomous (occasional/regular/heavy) taxonomies sufficient. Nor is it appropriate in every case to cite 'use' as the master status of individual or social groups. The context of the behaviours of social groups has become increasingly complex amidst the backdrop of contemporary social change, and current academic research must rise to the challenge of definition. This research, rather than applying out dated terms such as 'deviant' or 'user' attempts to apply the concept of 'risk taker' to adolescent activity, and specifically to cannabis use. As stated in section 2.0, such an attempt brings with it associated problems of definition. However it is believed that this approach is able to theoretically ground explanations of risk taking behaviour in the wider context of social change and allow for discussion of the social impact of such behaviour.

Although the initial focus of this research was to investigate the broader concept of drug use, it proved to be a mammoth task. A narrow spotlight on cannabis-related acts can be justified by recent developments in consumption and legislation. Accordingly, and therefore cannabis-related activity could provide a significant research base for investigating adolescent risk perception and activity. The normalisation debate (see Parker *et al.* 1998, Aldridge *et al.* 1999), or at least levels of consumption during adolescence (see section 2.11) also highlight this drug as relevant. Recent reclassification of cannabis to a Class C drug has perhaps confused young people as to the messages they receive about possible risks. The recent political debate (see Widdecombe & Kushlick 2004) over the reclassification of the drug also justifies this decision. The discussion surrounding the downgrading of cannabis from a Class B to a

Class C is of interest, primarily due to this decision being based on its associated risks. These risk are cited in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 as 'physical harm, their pleasurable effects, associated withdrawal after chronic use, and the harm that misuse may bring to families and society at large' (Drugscope 2004). The rationale of downgrading 'simple possession', whilst maintaining strict regulations for acts such as supply or trafficking highlights the relevance to the 'using' population. The issue that reclassification may prompt more young people to try cannabis, is perhaps of secondary concern to the conflicting and contradictory signals that young people absorb. In turn, these may affect risk perception in general.

Therefore the application of cannabis use to a risk taking model is complementary. There are however, those that have questioned this application on the grounds of perceived low level risk (Hammersley *et al.* 2001). Therefore the perception of the respondents in this sample will be determined before further analysis is carried out. The methodological decisions and justifications will now be discussed before a presentation of the most relevant supporting statistics.

Summary

2.0.

- Definitions of risk are complex and diffuse across a variety of disciplines.

2.01.

- Risk is generally acknowledges as a negative concept, assessable via mathematic calculation (statistical risk).

- It is measured in a variety of ways e.g. 'number of people affected'.

- Lay assessments highlight a difference between actual and appraised risk where terms such a possibility and likelihood are more commonly found.

2.02.

- Danger is similar to risk but not the same. Danger assumes the situation one is placed. The element of probability is removed.

2.03.

- Harm is a term used to describe a negative consequences (not necessarily physical).

2.04.

- A hazard is the specific event which varies the probability of a negative outcome.

2.05.

- A working description building on the research of this thesis must take note of the above.

- Such descriptions must be relevant to the context of the research and sought for each diverse set of subjects.

2.06.

- The findings of this investigation can be used and built upon as a methodological tool.

2.1.

- Research completed by wider society can be used to investigate those behaviours generally regarded as risky.

- These behaviours include drug use, alcohol use, unprotected sex, driving, truancy and crime.

2.2.

- This discussion leads, in part, to a narrowing of the focus of this thesis to cannabis related activity.

Methodology

As highlighted throughout this thesis, there are numerous studies of risk, generating a number of different methodological possibilities. From developing the research questions, it was then necessary to consider how they should be answered. It was decided that the optimum method of gaining access to a large cross-section of young people was via a school (see Dolcini *et al.* 1989, Arnett 1990, Benthin *et al.* 1993, Gonzalez *et al.* 1994, Benthin *et al.* 1995, Hammersley, Ditton & Main 1997, Donohew *et al.* 2000, Hampson *et al.* 2000, Denscombe 2001a, 2001b, Goddard 2001). Once access to a school was guaranteed, the process of designing a research model was necessary, taking into consideration sampling procedure, consent, ethics, confidentiality and data protection, and overall time scale. The specifics of question formulation ensued, including piloting and redrafting. The particulars of the data collection procedure were finalised before any fieldwork began. The relevant literature with critical asides is cited here, along with a detailed description of the methodology used in this research.

3.0 The Selected School and Surrounding Area

The school in question educates children from age 11 – 18, with an optional sixth form facility available. The total number of students in Jan 2003 was 1830, the highest within the local authority. The attainment levels published for Jan 2003 were as follows; 10.7% of pupils were recognised as having special educational needs; 72% of pupils achieved level 5 or above in the Key Stage 3 English test, 71% in the Key Stage 3 Mathematics test and 72% in the Key Stage 3 Science test; 52% of 15 year olds

achieved 5 or more GCSE/GNVQ grades A*-C; and 94% achieved 5 or more A*-G. The national averages for the later statistics were 51.5% and 88.9% respectively.

For further education in the same time period, the school in question had 254 students enrolled in courses post 16, and an average GCE/VCE/A/AS point score of 207.0 per student. Compared with national statistics, the average score for England was 254.5, the highest score for the local authority was 296.0, with the research school positioned as 8th out of 12 further education providers in the area[1].

Data from the 2001 Census and the Office of National Statistics provides the following information about the Ward and the Local Authority District (LAD). In terms of scale the Ward covers 1857 hectares of land, compared with the LAD as a whole as 28,560. In 2003 there were 6415 registered households with a significant proportion of both detached and semi-detached properties. The breakdown of the population is as follows.

Ward population	LAD Population	Ward as a % of LAD
15,500	248,175	6.2%

	Ward	LAD
Under 16	21%	21%
16-59	61%	58%
Over 60	18%	21%

Ward Ave Property Value	LAD Ave Property Value	National Ave Property Value
£72,164	£62,020	£119,436

In relation to relative deprivation, the Ward in question ranked 2,614 out of 8,414 English Wards, and in 2000 was one of the lowest ranked of all the Wards in the LAD. In 2001 37% of those aged 16-74 in this Ward had no qualifications, whereas only 12%

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[1] All statistics taken from www.dfes.gov.uk/performancetables

were qualified to degree level or higher. In 2000 1.2% of the Ward population were of ethnic minority origin.

A closer look at specific crimes and disorder in the LAD and the Ward provides the context, not only to the school in question, but also to the line of questioning taken by this research. All off the following information is taken from the LAD Crime and Disorder Audits of 2001 and 2004 .

(...) is situated in the former coalfield area of South Yorkshire and has a mixture of urban areas, villages and open country. Historically (...)'s economy was dominated by the area's steel works and coal mines but since the early 1980's twelve of the thirteen coal mines have closed. This has resulted in significant economic, social and environmental decline.

(Audit 2001:7)

Criminal damage in the LAD (ranging from graffiti to arson), although declining by 29% since 1998, was still a considerable problem to local businesses in 2001, many of who were repeatedly attacked.

Graffiti is a particularly visible form of criminal damage. Much of it is done by repeat offenders who compete to paint their 'tag' in as many places as possible. The result blights the built environment and gives an air of disrepair and neglect which can lead to further criminal damage and anti-social activity.

(Audit 2001:39)

In 2003/2004 the most likely form of criminal damage in the LAD was to vehicles (38%) followed by dwellings (35%). The rate of recorded criminal damage has increased since 2001/2002 (4473) and stood at 5549 in 2003/2004. In relation to graffiti the majority of offenders were aged 15-24, 9 out of 10 were male and half were known to their victims.

Shoplifting offences in 2001 had risen by 17% since 1998, again with repeated attacks common. Local estimates of the annual cost of such crimes to business (2000/2001) stood at £1,843,190 and £114,500 respectively for the above incidents.

In the LAD the use of controlled drugs, predominantly heroin, is a 'huge problem for the Borough'. In 2000/2001 439 people were arrested for possession of drugs, 49 people were processed for supplying illegal drugs, 16 involved class A substances, predominantly heroin. There is a strong link in this area between heroin use and prolific acquisitive crime, and female prostitution.

In 2003/2004 183 people were arrested and charged for possession, 37 for possession with intent and 6 with intent to supply. Although the number of arrests have fallen considerably the total value of drugs seized in the region has risen from £130,544 to £205,000. The drug of choice, and the most commonly used by those accessing the local Treatment Services was heroin. In 2004 the secondary drug of choice for these users was crack cocaine. This is a significant find since the last Audit.

Drug use was found to be prevalent within most areas of the LAD, however some areas, or 'hotspots' showed higher saturation. These areas tend to be known to the Borough as 'pockets of deprivation'

Binge drinking is most prevalent in Yorkshire and the Humber, the Northwest and the North-East of England than any other regions (Audit 2004: 47). In 2003/2004 27% of those arrested in the LAD were said to be under the influence of alcohol.

In 2003/2004 the LAD witnessed 161 cases of anti-social behaviour dealt with by the Police and the local Council. 76% of the perpetrators were male. 18% of these incidents were reported in the researched Ward, the second highest in the LAD. The LAD Council Housing Services also received 5,108 complaints, of which the Ward area accounted for 7%. Of police reported incidents youth nuisance incidents fell considerably from 2002/2003 to 2003/2004. Nevertheless, drunkenness in licensed premises, breach of the peace and motorcycle nuisance had increased.

In the 2004 Audit, the researched Ward was targeted as a 'hot-spot' area for off road motor vehicle nuisance. The new powers in the Police Reform Act are being widely called upon in the LAD. The act

> created an offence of using a vehicle in such a way as to cause, or (be) likely to cause alarm, distress or annoyance to members of the public either on a road or a public place, where the motor vehicle is being driven without due care and attention or off road where it is being driven without lawful authority on common land, moorland or any other land that does not form part of a road or on a footpath or bridleway.
>
> (Audit 2004: 58)

The Audit cites most recent figures that confirm that 44 vehicles have been confiscated by the police and over 400 warning notices issued.

In the LAD binge drinking is noted as a significant problem, with the weekend evenings accounting for a significant proportion of offending. Alcohol related offences accounted for nearly 20% of those committed by under 18's in the LAD. In 2004 the Audit states that alcohol related disorder and binge drinking continues to grow. During 2003/2004 207 young people were arrested for an alcohol related offence, 72% of these being a public order offence. Approximately 15% of referrals to Youth Offending Services during this time period were alcohol related.

From October 2000 to March 2001 54% of recorded anti-social behaviour related incidents were attributed to 'youth nuisance'. South Yorkshire Police Authority estimate that 43% of all youth nuisance complaints are not recorded to the police. 'Youth nuisance' as defined by the Audit (2001: 36)

> causes older people a high degree of concern. It is sometimes criminal but also included 'sub-criminal' behaviour e.g. drinking in public, noise, playing football in 'inappropriate places', riding motorbikes recklessly. It causes considerable distress and conflict between generations.

3.01. Access to a School and its Subjects

> It is normal to accomplish access through some established contact ... in gaining access in this way one also gains a 'sponsor' in the organisation, to whom one is accountable.
>
> While they can help you avoid analytic errors, you should remember that they may have ulterior motives in cooperating, such as influencing your account.

(Gilbert 2001: 150)

Once access had been obtained the identified research harboured a variety of methods of access from sampling the entire school present on one day (Hammersley *et al.* 1997, Hampson *et al.* 2000), selecting specific target classes (Gonzalez *et al.* 1994) to allowing questionnaires to be delivered as part of a health education programme by independent researchers.

In most of the literature, the specifics about how initial access was achieved are not documented. However the problems and hurdles involved in this process should not be overlooked. Access to the selected school[2] was achieved via prior friendships with the Head teacher and Chair of Governors. Previous to the start of this research, the researcher initiated contact in the form of a letter. This letter tested the water for the possibility of conducting research at that school. The feedback was positive, and

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[2] It should be mentioned that the selected school was not randomly selected. The school in question was chosen due to the ease of access.

contact was suspended for approximately one year whilst the researcher completed prior academic commitments. A similar letter was composed a year later, affirming interest and setting a time scale of 3 years. Feedback was again positive, with a request for a defined research proposal. Over the next year and a half, whilst the specifics of the research were being teased out, the Head teacher introduced the researcher to his necessary subordinates, from whom consent was also required.

Access to a sampling frame was also delivered through the Head teacher. Initially this involved information on all tutor groups and subsequent group tutors. As the research progressed, names and address of all sampled students were also obtained in this way.

There was a conscious effort not to let the nature of the access influence the research design. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions, and the possible ramifications for the reputation of the school, the researcher was keen to iron out any conflicts of interests that the school may have had. Luckily, the Head teacher was extremely welcoming to the research proposal, and allowed the research design to progress with little school input.

Problems arose when, after a year of preparation and Phase I completed, the Head teacher resigned. Fortunately, his successor already worked at the school, was known to the researcher, and contact was attempted to ensure the continuation of the research. However, due to the practicalities of installing a new Head teacher, the schools priorities shifted. Ultimately resuming contact took longer than expected, and Phase II of the research began much later than anticipated.

However, once both phases of data collection had commenced, the researcher was allowed to work with other staff and students, independently of the Head teacher. So much so, that prior to the second phase of the research, contact and arrangements were made directly with group tutors, with feedback given when necessary. This could have been a direct result of the workload of the new Head teacher. Nevertheless, this freedom was welcomed.

Access to the students was permitted initially by the Head teacher, on the basis of group tutors agreeing to cooperate. It was decided that data collection could take place in one lesson of 50 minutes. Obviously the Head teacher was cautious about which timetabled lesson could be used. The evident choice was Tutorial periods, which often consisted of drugs, alcohol or smoking education. This period was timetabled once a week, on a rotating basis.

Negotiating access with the school, and ultimately the Head teacher was not difficult. Nonetheless, the access granted by the school had a number of problems. The research could not divert from the scheduled curriculum teaching, so a single non-curriculum lesson was considered the best option. This meant that access to the subjects was limited to once a week, extending the total estimated time for completion.

It was suggested that students would be less willing to volunteer as subjects in their free time, such as lunch break or after school. Therefore one lesson of 50 minutes would guarantee a larger response rate. This would suffice for any quantitative design but would limit the range of qualitative methods which could be effectively employed in the given time.

3.1. Research Design

Once access had been dealt with, it was necessary to operationalise the identified key concepts. This entailed the measurement of specific independent and dependent variables. As Bryman notes (2001: 66) measurement allows the researcher to determine fine characteristical differences between people and estimates of the degree of relationship between concepts.

The next step was to provide indicators that would represent the concepts in question. This researcher chose to provide questions in the form of self-completion questionnaires including multiple-indicators measures of the research concepts.

The benefits of choosing self-completion questionnaires are as follows (taken from Bryman 2001: 129 *et seq.*). They are cheaper to administer than interviews, although more expensive than postal questionnaires. Self-completion questionnaires are quicker to administer, with large samples delivered in one time period. There is no interviewer bias or variability as might be the case in an interview.

Quantitative methods were chosen primarily due to the access procedure and the constitution of the sample. The questionnaires were administered and collected by the researcher, who was present during completion. This resulted in an excellent response rate of those who were present in class. Large proportions of the sample could be targeted in one session, and the overall administration time was satisfactory.

Conversely, Bryman (*ibid.*: 77) notes that quantitative research is not faultless. He lists the following criticisms; the measurement process possesses an artificial and spurious

sense of precision and accuracy; the reliance on instruments and procedures hinders the connection between research and everyday life; and the analysis of relationships between variables creates a static view of social life that is independent of people's lives.

In relation to the benefits cited, although quick to administer, as the researcher was present during completion, the process was just as time consuming. The limits of interviewer bias were not entirely overcome either, as stated, the researcher was present during completion. In addition, questionnaires limit the responses given to the questions given i.e., there is no room for probing or prompting or for collecting addition data or asking additional questions. In defence, as the researcher was present during data collection any problems could be resolved in this way.

To aid the triangulation of methods used in this research it was considered applicable to investigate the use of qualitative research tools.

> Group interviews would avail the researcher of the opinions of a large number of subjects in a relatively easy-to-access fashion; it would thus complement any other method being used. It would, on one side, 'triangulate' the data of formal methodological techniques by adding to them the human element of the voices of multiple subjects

> (Morgan 1993: 24)

The application of focus groups in social research has grown in popularity in the last three decades (Krueger &Casey 2000: 5). Their purpose is to investigate perspectives and beliefs, and especially factors which influence opinions, behaviours and motivations.

A common myth of focus group research is that it cannot be used to investigate sensitive issues. Morgan (1993: 6) states that 'in actual experience, people readily talk about a wide range of personal and emotional topics'. The focus group aims to find out as much about a topic, as possible, by not constraining conversations, and probing interesting topics. In one of the first studies based on the use of focus groups during World War Two, Merton found that members of the military were willing to share sensitive information when they felt comfortable in their environment and surrounded by likeminded others (Krueger & Casey 2000: 6).

Focus groups should be carried out with respect, toleration and consideration of the target audience, especially with regard to the topics of conversation (Morgan 1993: 10). Issues that are too sensitive for open discussion will make participants feel uncomfortable and reluctant to speak. Self-disclosure will be draw out if the environment is permissive and non-judgemental (Krueger & Casey 2000: 9). Nevertheless such forums can work. Close attention needs to be drawn to ethical concerns of confidentiality, not just by the researcher, but by other members of the discussion group (Morgan 1993: 12).

It is also necessary to gauge the topic of conversation with the prospective participants. If the issues being discussed are removed from the lives of the participants, and levels of actual experience are low, the amount of feedback gained may be inadequate or irrelevant (*ibid.*: 13).

The use of focus groups is advantageous when there is a gap between professionals and their target audience who have developed a way of thinking 'about reality that may be substantially different from the people they are trying to reach' (Morgan 1993: 16).

They are also an excellent way of investigating complex behaviour and motivations that are not usually given an appropriate forum for discussion. During the focus group participants 'can become more explicit about their own views' and interaction 'often creates a cueing phenomenon that has the potential for extracting more information than other methods (*ibid.*: 17). Focus groups can also be more cost effective than single interviews as multiple respondents can be questioned in one sitting (*ibid.*: 32).

The use of focus groups was chosen primarily to reinforce and expand on the survey data. It was noted that the topics of discussion could be construed as sensitive, but it was thought that given the age of the respondents, group participation, rather than individual interviews, would be less intimidating. The content of the focus groups was based on the questionnaires, and the same questions were used. In addition, new questions were based on questionnaire responses, thus pre-empting the level of involvement in the set activities and validity of the data collection.

The focus group allowed the researcher to investigate the decisions of the target audience and then relate the answers to professional and academic reasoning. If there was indeed a gap between the reasoning of young people and higher authorities, then this forum would provide a means of exploring it.

Nevertheless there are weaknesses of using focus groups. They require more skill as researchers than survey techniques, especially in relation to group dynamics, participants may feel a pressure to conform, some individuals may be stifled rather than stimulated by the group, production of irrelevant information may be high, and the results can be overwhelmingly biased by the researchers input (Morgan 1993: 34). On the whole, the limitations of focus group research are based on the actions of the

researcher. Although no previous experience had been gained on the facilitation of focus groups (other than piloting), the researcher was confident that a structured schedule and an informal approach to the situation would dispel these issues.

3.2. Sampling

As a large sample size is likely to (but cannot guarantee) increases in the precision of the data and a narrowing of the confidence interval and sampling error (Bryman 2001: 95) a relatively large sample has obvious benefits . Ultimately, sample size depends greatly on time and cost. The ultimate sample size should also take into consideration non-response (*ibid.*). An acceptable response rate for self-completion questionnaire surveys is estimated at 60 per cent (Arber in Gilbert 2001: 61).

Bryman notes (2001: 97) that convenience sampling is such that it is selective by virtue of accessibility. Although they do not offer representative samples, they do have uses in piloting research instruments and analysis. Alternatively, they can 'provide a springboard for further research or allow links to be forged with existing findings in this area'(*ibid.*). In support Arber (in Gilbert 2001: 61) notes that 'if the researcher's aim is to generate theory and a wider understanding of social processes, the respresentativeness of the sample may be of less importance'.

A sample design may involve a mixture of both probability and purposive sampling. For example, in a study of occupational aspirations of secondary school children, the researcher may only have sufficient funds to study a small number of schools. These should be selected using purposive sampling ... However, within each school the sample of students to be surveyed should be selected using probability sampling.

(Arber in Gilbert 2001: 62)

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Previous research based in schools has varied in sample size, from number of total respondents, to number of schools used. At the larger end, Denscombe's (2001a, 2001b) final sample consisted of 1,648 questionnaires distributed in more than one school to mixed ability tutor groups in one school year (Y11). Hammersley *et al.* (1997) sampled 532 students (50% female), aged between 12 and 16, in two Glasgow secondary schools. Dolcini *et al.* (1989) sampled 458 students (mean age 13.0), while Gonzalez *et al.* (1994) sampled 440 students (54% female). Benthin *et al.* (1995) sampled all the students who were at school on one given day, 411 in total (51% female), while Hampson *et al.* (2000) attempted to sample an entire school, resulting in 323 students, 84% of the school population (51.6% female). At the other end of the scale, Arnett (1990) sampled 145 students, all female, Hartness *et al.* (1995) targeted 208 11–15 year olds in one Glasgow school, and Benthin *et al.* (1993) sampled only 41 students from two high schools, via voluntary selection.

A form of random sampling procedure for focus groups is usually preferred, but in practice is rare (Morgan 1993: 71, 95). The optimum number of groups is noted as 6 to 8, to allow significant comparisons to be made (Krueger & Casey 2000: 73). Large groups are difficult to control, and can alienate some participants. Groups with less than 6 tend to limit the range of experiences and opinions that can be extracted (*ibid.*: 74).

As stated above, the school in question was not randomly chosen, but was selected due to ease of access. This does not necessarily imply that the school did not fit certain predefined criteria, or did not constitute an adequate research subject. As noted, convenience sampling is often used in social research, and benefited the researcher in terms of time and resources. Due to the character of this research and the purpose of its

composition, the researcher felt that such a sampling method was acceptable, justified by its exploratory nature and commitment to further research.

Due to the large population of the school, and the limitations of sampling a proportion of different tutor groups, it was decided that a systematic random sample of whole tutor groups would be carried out. The researcher selected an initial sample of 200 students[3]. From a sampling frame obtained from the Head, 9 tutor groups were selected, 2 from Y9, Y10 and Y11 and 3 mixed Y12/13 groups[4]. There were approximately 30 students per tutor group, (approximately 50-60 selected in each year band) and the final sample consisted of 212 students. Taking into account non-response, and the possible truancy rate of the school, it was expected that the final sample would be less.

Each group tutor was then contacted via letter to ask for his or her cooperation in the research. It was established from the Head teacher that one selected group tutor who had not replied, was on sick leave. A substitute group was selected in its place. Once initial cooperation had been confirmed, a proposed data collection schedule was sent to all participating members of staff.

On the days involved in Phase I data collection, the researcher attempted to involve every member of the selected tutor group. This was limited in some cases by those who did not have parental consent (see below). Due to absenteeism on the data collection days, the final sample consisted on 151 respondents.

Phase II participants were selected from the original sample of tutor groups, ensuing that all involved had completed Phase I of the research. Due to anonymity it was not

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[3] The total size of the school was estimated at approximately 1800 students
[4] Each tutor group had an approximately equal number of males and females.

possible to select participants on the basis of their questionnaire responses. The group tutor, who was asked to provide a variety of personalities for the focus groups, therefore elected participants (as did Denscombe 2001b: 163). 8 focus groups were held in total, with 5 or 6 participants in each.

Hammersley *et al.* cite that sampling limitations would ensue that 'habitual truants would be under-represented' noting that 'the sample is thus a sample of secondary school attendees, but not a representative sample of the general population aged 11-16' (1997: 233). Hampson *et al.* (2000: 178) cite, as limitations to their research, too small a sample to 'replicate our findings on a hold-out sample [and that] the data were cross-sectional, and therefore no causal inferences can be made'. In relation to a study consisting of 174 undergraduates Jensen notes

> Such small and homogenous samples (college students particularly) cast doubt on all conclusions about the relation between perceived risk of punishment and offence rates.
>
> Jensen *et al.* (1978: 60)

In this research the population is the selected school. The sample was chosen randomly from the total student population, and used a list of all possible tutor groups as the sampling frame. Because the school was not randomly selected, and relied on access, availability and the researcher's judgements, the sample is subject to bias and is not representative. Using one school will limit any generalisations made from the analysis to the wider population.

The selection of whole tutor groups may not act as a representative sample of the school, or young people. Tutor groups spend a lot of time together, and peer groups will be built within them, it is often the case that students are placed in a group with friends when they progress from primary school. These peer groups also become

apparent outside school time, as young people socialise together. As is known, peer groups often engage in similar activities during leisure time, and may hold similar beliefs and values. The problems involved in studying the behaviour and values of the sample are obvious.

Due to the nature of the access (once a week) it was necessary to administer questionnaires to a large proportion of the sample in one sitting. This would not have been possible if respondents were selected from every possible tutor group. In addition, members of staff were concerned that students would feel singled out if randomly sampled, and would be reluctant to participate. It was thought that parents would also have the same apprehensions given the nature of the questions. Making the data collection a whole group task would deflate these concerns.

Relying on the teachers for the selection of the focus groups also raises problems (Morgan 1993: 10). Although a prerequisite for the sample was given, it is possible that teachers selected students who would portray the school, and their group, in a positive light. Although there is no guarantee that this did not happen, the researcher did have a good relationship with tutors and they were aware of the benefits of representative research. In addition, the nature of the data obtained does not support this concern.

In general, the points of Hammersley *et al.* (1997) are noted, and the influence of truancy on the sample is obvious. With research of this nature it is perturbing that it is those very people who are not present which may engage in the most interesting behaviour. Furthermore, the access prescribed by the school did not aid this problem. Tutorial periods do not involve work that is accredited to a qualification. During the focus groups the researcher was informed that in tutorial 'we usually just sit and play on

the internet' or 'chat about sex and drinking'. Therefore although attendance is compulsory, the appeal to play truant may be greater in this lesson than in others.

3.3. Consent

Due to the nature of certain research it is important that all participation is based on the notion of consent. When dealing with young people, in particular children under the age of 18, parental consent may also be necessary. Non-consent, or refusals need to be minimised as much as possible. Arber (in Gilbert 2001: 74) notes that the rate of refusals is based on the level of interest in the study, the perceived importance of the study, the perceived legitimacy of the research, and the persistence and approach of the researcher.

Donohew *et al.* (2000), Dolcini *et al.* (1989), and Benthin *et al.* (1993, 1995), all sought parental consent for their research. There is a difference in procedure between affirmative parental consent (Donohew *et al.*; with 7% returning negative consent forms, and Benthin *et al.*; all were returned (n=41) and passive parental consent (Dolcini *et al.* 1989; 95% participation rate). In addition the students were also informed that their participation is voluntary. Hampson *et al.* (2000) and Hammersley *et al.* (1997) cite that voluntary consent was explained but resulted in no refusals. Arnett (1990:173) told students they were involved in a study of adolescence and stressed that participation was voluntary. Two girls declined to participate from an all female sample.

Coupled with the points relating to access, is the notion of consent, specifically from the school in question. As stated initial consent was achieved from the Head teacher. It

was then advised that other members of staff should approve the research proposal. The researcher met with the Pupil Sub-Committee on two occasions - meeting with Governors, senior members of staff and student representatives. Their main concerns revolved around confidentiality, data protection, police checks, and administration time. During the second meeting these concerns were resolved.

It was also necessary to meet with group tutors before data collection to defuse any fears they had about the research. The researcher held a 'drop-in session'. at the school, at the end of one school day, and most of the selected tutors attended.

Parental consent forms were drafted for each student identified in the sample. It was decided that due to a tight time frame, consent should be obtained via passive methods and that replies would only be necessary if consent was not given. Consent forms were sent out three weeks before the scheduled data collection. 20 consent forms were returned requesting that the said child would not participate in the research, which accounted for 9.4% of the selected sample. These students were given alternative questionnaires (designed in a similar format) on the data collection days, which did not include any sensitive questions[5]. This was necessary to avoid making the students feel uncomfortable at their lack of participation.

There may be many factors influencing the decisions not to allow consent for this research. In relation to Arber's points, it is unlikely that parents did not find the topic interesting, on the contrary they may have found it too interesting (a 'hot potato') to allow their child to contribute. It is possible that parents thought that the topic was not important, or important *enough* to warrant a diversion from regular curriculum teaching.

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[5] The consent forms included the name of the student in question. During data collection the researcher presented the teacher with a list of non-participants. As the questionnaires were distributed. the teacher interjected with an alternative for the appropriate students.

The legitimacy of the researcher could have been questioned, in terms of status and experience. Finally the researcher did not follow up non-consenters, as it was not considered appropriate to push the issue. Nonetheless the consent form was devised to be as enticing as possible. In addition it should be noted that one parent commented on the response slip that their child would be too shy to participate in the group discussions. As the slip had been returned (indicating no consent), definite consent for just the questionnaires could not be assumed. As a result this student was removed from both phases of the study.

All students were told that they were involved in a health and lifestyle study and that their participation was voluntary. An information sheet was provided with the questionnaire that contained the title of the research and the researchers contact details. Students were encouraged to ask questions, or contact the researcher with any queries they may have.

Consent forms included the possibility of Phase II of the research. In practice, voluntary participation in the focus groups was stressed. Most respondents were eager to participate, due to the fact that the discussions would take place outside the classroom, and the set tutorial work could be avoided.

Because of the sensitivity of the topic in question, many of the teachers were worried about the methodology and confidentiality. This did mean that specific questions about the use of drugs and availability were restrained. It also meant that the questions about cannabis were designed to relate to a 'hypothetical other', rather than directed at the respondent. This satisfied the concerns raised but presents minor problems in terms of data analysis.

The process of obtaining parental consent does raise ethical dilemmas. Because response was only required if consent was not given, the majority of parents did not have to respond. The issue here is the possibilities that the letter was misplaced, was forgotten about, or was lost in the post on delivery to the parents or back to the researcher. However, no consent forms arrived after the deadline for return. Letters were posted to the parents, and not sent home with the students, to increase the odds of delivery. Furthermore, it is considered that due to the topic area, parents would feel strongly against their child participating, and would act efficiently to ensure that this did not happen.

The letter of consent did not specifically outline the topic area, and referred to the research as investigating 'risk taking behaviour in young people'. This was included on the advice of the Head teacher who believed that the inclusion of the word 'drugs' would reduce the level of consent.[6]

Although it was insisted that student participation was voluntary, this is also an ambiguous point. As the sampling procedure involved the whole class, the issue of participation was raised to the group as a whole. It is believed that the likelihood of any individual student voicing his or her concerns would be small. If a student did not want to cooperate, they may not complete the questionnaire or, may complete it incorrectly. An analysis of the completed questionnaires does not suggest that this happened.

The same limitations apply to consent for the focus groups. However, all participants were eager to volunteer and participate in order to be removed from the normal classroom environment.

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[6] The Head teacher was aware of the importance of such a study for the school and was eager to achieve the best results possible.

3.4. Ethics

All research using human subjects must adhere to the following principles.

❏ *Beneficence* – maximising good outcomes for science, humanity, and the individual research participants while avoiding or minimising unnecessary risk, harm or wrong.

❏ *Respect* – protecting the autonomy of (autonomous) persons with courtesy and respect for individuals as persons, including those who are not autonomous (e.g. infants, senile).

❏ *Justice* – ensuring reasonable, non-exploitative, and carefully considered procedures and their fair administration; fair distribution of costs and benefits among persons and groups (i.e. those who bear the risks of research should be those who benefit from it).

Sieber (1992: 18)

There are numerous ethical considerations to be tackled when approaching research with children. To ensure the suitability of the researcher, a police check was obtained and presented to the school committee. All proposed methods were finalised with the Headteacher and the interests of the students were considered at all times.

It is essential that within any research, not just that involving children, confidentiality is ensured.

Assurances are commonly given to those providing response to questionnaires or interview questions that these data are needed for purposes of statistical aggregation and the individual will not be identifiable in the resulting analysis.

(Bulmer in Gilbert 2001: 51)

As students are encouraged to be as honest as possible the confidentiality of their responses is paramount. Hampson *et al.* (2000) and Donohew *et al.* (2000) claim that anonymity was assured by placing the completed questionnaires in sealed envelopes.

With survey data, in addition to omitting respondents' names and addresses, their geographical location is frequently not accurately identified, thus maintaining confidentiality.

(Bulmer in Gilbert 2001: 54)

Many research projects do not keep a record of respondent's personal details, and encourage participants not to write their name on completed questionnaires. However if any follow up research is required, such as the formulation of focus groups, it would not be possible to select respondents on the basis of their previous answers if responses are anonymous (Denscombe 2001b: 163). To alleviate this problem Donohew *et al.* (2000: 1084) prepared each questionnaire with the student's name, which was removed from an envelope just before distribution. Although students were told of the confidential nature of the research, an ultraviolet pen was used to give ID numbers to all the questionnaires. This technique raises obvious ethical concerns, which the authors rectified by pronouncing that the Research Subjects Review Committee at the umbrella university approved the procedure.

Whilst gaining the consent of relevant parties at the school, the researcher was keen to stress that anonymity would be assured at all times. This meant that the name of the school, the exact geographical location, and any names and addresses given, would be removed from any subsequent publications.

All respondents, in both stages of the research, were told that their answers would be kept confidential. Although names and addresses were obtained initially to send out consent forms, no record of such data was kept.

Respondents were encouraged not to write their names on the questionnaires. When they had completed their answers the questionnaire was to be placed in an A4 manila envelope and sealed. Each questionnaire had a unique identification number in the top right hand corner that was attributed before distribution. Each questionnaire began with the following statement.

```
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                            │
│                      Confidential                          │
│                                                            │
│  Please answer all questions as truthfully as you can. Nobody will know │
│  what you have written because this questionnaire does not have you     │
│  name on it. When you have finished put it in the envelope and give it to│
│  the researcher so nobody at the school will know the answers you gave.  │
│                                                            │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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To highlight the importance of this issue the statement was placed in a bold framed box, with the title enhanced and noticeable.

Confidentiality in the focus groups was more difficult to assure, as the respondents were aware of the presence of a tape recorder. The researcher spent time reassuring the respondents that no one at the school would hear the recording and it was only for the benefit of the researcher.[7] Initial concerns were soon forgotten as the discussion progressed and most respondents were very open in their reactions.

Respondent anonymity was essential in obtaining truthful and insightful answers from the respondents. However, as stated above, it was not possible to select specific respondents for the focus groups based on the nature of their Phase I answers. To talk to respondents with specific leisure pursuits or beliefs could have strengthened the quality of the results.

The presence of the tape recorder during the focus groups did initially make some respondents feel uncomfortable, and this could have affected the responses given. However, it was not possible to hide a tape recorder in the rooms (given the tight

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[7] The introductory statement assuring confidentiality was delivered before the tape recorder was introduced, hence there is no transcript available.

timetable, and back to back lessons), and it was considered fundamentally unethical to do so.

Confidentiality between respondents was more difficult to assure. Although the nature of the study and the issue of confidentiality was raised, there were no guarantees that information discussed in the groups, stayed within the groups. As the sample consisted of respondents from the same tutor group, the students may already have had good relationships. This may lessen the extent of discussion with others, outside the focus group, as activities and opinions may already be well known.

3.5. Time Scale

The completion time of a questionnaire is vital in gathering valid information. The optimum completion time should be no more than 30 minutes (Simmons in Gilbert 2001: 98). Previous research indicates that Benthin *et al.* (1993) issued a questionnaire that took 30 minutes to complete, whereas Gonzalez *et al.* (1994) questionnaires took approximately 45 minutes to complete.

As stated above, due to the access procedure and certain unforeseen circumstances the data collection took longer than anticipated. Administration of the questionnaires began on 20[th] March 2003 and finished on the 8[th] of April 2003. Phase II, the focus group discussions, took place from 13[th] November 2003 until the 25[th] February 2004. Due to the nature of the access (one lesson per week), and the desire to administer Phase I in a short period of time, more than one sampled tutor group were given questionnaires during the same lesson.

There was a substantial amount of information to be gained from the questionnaires. After drafting and piloting, it was predicted that the final version would be possible to complete in one lesson (50 minutes). In reality completion time varied from 30 minutes to 50 minutes. There were few questionnaires that were not fully completed. Completion time depended primarily on the age of the respondents, with younger students taking the longest time to complete.

The focus groups also ranged in completion time from 20 to 40 minutes, and again had to be managed in one 50 minute lesson. The researcher conducted one focus group per week. The time taken varied on the amount of input given by the respondents.

One major limitation in the time scale of the research is the length of time it took to complete. The focus group sessions were arranged some 7 months after Phase I, and at the beginning of a new school year. This meant that it was possible that some (or all) students who completed questionnaires in Y13, Y12 and Y11 had left the school at the end of the July 2003. This severely limited the potential sample for Phase II. It also construed that respondents would now be in a different school year, and possibly a different age to that which was recorded on the questionnaires. This would mean that any direct link between questionnaire and focus group variables would be difficult.

The delay in conducting Phase II also resulted in one of the tutor groups being assigned a new group tutor. This meant that the researcher had to obtain access, via the same processes as stated, with this new member of staff, before data collection could commence. Fortunately the new tutor was welcoming of this research and was happy to let the research continue.

Distributing more than one set of questionnaires to more than one tutor group in one lesson proved problematic for the researcher. Questionnaires were distributed, and then the researcher stayed with each group for approximately half the total time. This meant that there were periods when the researcher left the room and the teacher was left overseeing completion. Obvious teacher influences are noted here, and will be discussed in more detail in the section 'Researcher/Teacher Presence'.

The variance in completion time also caused problems when some students finished before others in the same group. This was quickly resolved by asking the teachers to prepare alternative work for the students to continue with. If no work had been prepared the researcher left the teachers a number of the non-participation questionnaires, which included puzzles, for the students to complete.

There were only minimal concerns regarding the completion time of the focus groups. These involved the input from the group, which affected the overall content and amount of data obtained.

3.6. Researcher/teacher Presence

Hampson *et al.* (2000) state that their researcher stayed in the room at all times to ensure individual responses, but did not patrol the room. Donohew (2000) states that questionnaires were distributed by trained graduates, and teachers were asked to remain as secondary to the research assistants. Benthin *et al.* (1995) stress that researchers collected the completed questionnaires and teachers were not present. Dolcini *et al.* (1989) state that independent researchers delivered their questionnaires.

The presence of the researcher in focus groups is not such an issue, as the *role* of the researcher as moderator.

> The role of the moderator is to ask questions, listen, keep conversation on track, and make sure everybody has a chance to share.
>
> (Krueger & Casey 2000: 9)

The moderator should not convey a position of authority. Often the researcher will refer to the focus group as a 'small group discussion' so the process does not seem intimidating (Krueger & Casey 2000: 9). This is especially useful when dealing with young people. It is noted that the researcher can adopt a

> passive, nondirective approach where the interviewer-observer only asks enough questions or probes on a limited basis or offers reinforcement to keep a discussion going.
>
> The other side of the interviewers role is directive or active. In this situation the interviewer is very involved with the direction of the interview ... or as someone who exercises considerable control... by administering a structured and ordered set of items
>
> (Morgan 1993: 26)

In reality it is suggested that a position somewhere between the two approaches is preferred (Cronin in Gilbert 2001: 166).

As stated above, it was not possible for the researcher to be present throughout the full 50 minutes of questionnaire completion. Approximately half of the time was spent with each group. The researcher did not patrol the room, but did approach students when they raised their hand for assistance.[8] The rest of the time the group tutor stayed with the group. The teachers were asked to remain as unobtrusive as possible, and to refrain from helping students or suggesting answers.

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[8] The researcher was careful not influence the answers given by the respondents and encouraged respondents to miss out questions and come back to them at the end if they were struggling.

There were no teachers present during the focus group discussions. However the researcher (as moderator) did maintain a relatively high level of moderation during the sessions. This was necessary to direct the group to questions previously answered in the questionnaires (where more to give detail was not possible). Given the age of the participants, a structured format reduced the chance that the group would diverge from the topic in question.

The presence of a teacher is problematic for a number of reasons. Respondents may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions with a teacher in view, and may not give honest responses. The teachers may inadvertently influence the answers of the students or perhaps do this on purpose to give a good impression of the tutor group. Because the questionnaire was somewhat new to the teachers, and not work set by themselves, they may discuss the questions with students. However, the group tutor does often not script tutorial lessons and the lesson plan of activities is delivered to each group at the start of the lesson.[9] In this respect, the questionnaire lesson did not differ too greatly from normal scheduled lessons. This methodological choice was not ideal however. Nevertheless, most teachers did cooperate, intervening only to discourage disruptions rather than involving themselves in the completion process.

There are obvious problems with the role of the researcher as moderator in the focus groups. High-level moderation can impede rather than facilitate group interaction (Cronin in Gilbert 2001: 167). There may be a desire by the moderator to influence questions, or try and extract the desired responses. However, there is also the need to keep each group as similar as possible to allow for comparisons to be made. The researcher in this study is confident that the structured format of the focus group

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[9] This process was observed during time spent at the school.

schedule meant that diversions were limited, and bias was minimised. This is not to suggest that differences in the approach to each group occurred, based primarily on group dynamics. This is a predicament that is difficult to overcome by even the most experienced researcher.

3.7. Room Allocation

The focus groups should be held in rooms where the participants feel comfortable (Krueger & Casey 2000: 9). It is essential that the room allows effective communication between participants; there will be a minimum of distractions; and recording can easily be carried out (Cronin in Gilbert 2001: 172). The allocation for questionnaire administration is more amenable.

Phase I was administered in the classrooms used for normal tutorial lessons. Students sat in pairs at each end of a desk. The rooms were quite large, and each desk was a good distance apart.

The rooms allocated for the focus groups varied. During tutorial lessons, every tutor group is allocated a tutor room as their base. Subsequently, the number of available rooms during this period is minimal. The room of choice was a meeting room situated off the main corridor. This room had a central desk, comfy chairs, blinds and relative privacy. In addition 2 focus groups were held in a small office joined directly to a classroom in use, and 2 were held in a departmental office that included a study area.

Although each student in Phase I sat some distance apart and were told to work in silence, the temptation of young people to be disruptive and chat to their friends is

inevitable, and could ultimately affect results. The ideal situation would have placed the students at individual examination desks to avoid this problem. This was not possible due to the availability of sufficient space. The differences in answers given does suggest that respondents worked on their own as much as possible. Conversations which were overheard by the researcher seemed to facilitate discussion on different activities, resulting in a greater variety of results, rather than the proposed opposite.

The variation in rooms for Phase II could affect results, with different influences apparent. The small office attached to the classroom in use was noisy, but the group within the classroom was not the sample tutor group, and the respondents were not distracted by their classmates.

On the whole the choice of rooms was beneficial to the research. The students did not frequent the allocated rooms, thus making them feel privileged to use them and important via their selection.

3.8. Questionnaire Design[10]

3.81. Demographics

Simmons (in Gilbert 2001: 90) notes that asking questions about personal attributes can be more difficult than first assumed. Each individual's situation regarding occupation, living arrangements, income and so on is intrinsically different, and involves more possible variations than it is possible to code on a questionnaire. Therefore the wording of questions and the method of answering needs close attention.

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[10] The final draft of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix D.

A series of questions about the respondents were necessary to provide more information than simply beliefs and experiences. Gender differences in risk taking are a key concept along with age and were included accordingly. In addition to age, school year was also included, as each year is made up of two age groups. This was necessary as a peer groups made at school may consist of different ages, but from one school year. To learn more about the respondents, and to relate this specifically to risk taking, questions on spare time activities, part time work and pocket money were also asked. Leisure time and employment may also be indicators of risk taking, whereas amount of pocket money will limit the types of activity one can engage in. Preference in musical taste was also asked for interest on the respondent's part.

Due to the length of the questionnaire, and the amount of variables under investigation, the number of demographic questions used was relatively restricted. More variables in this section could have produced interesting results as to the personal characteristics which are attributed to a risk taker. This relationship was not the main focus of this research, although some conclusions are drawn from the evidence available.

3.82. Types of Question

The type of questions necessary to explore the research questions, and the identified variables, were based predominantly on personal behaviour. When questioning about behaviour, past, present and possibly future, Simmons (in Gilbert 2001: 90) suggests that an explanation of key terms may be necessary to enhance the validity of the responses.

There is an obvious choice to be made about the format of the questions: open or closed. The use of open questions in questionnaires has many advantages. Respondents can answer in their own terms, unusual responses are often generated, the level of knowledge and understanding of the issues can be assessed and they can be used to generate fixed questions in further research (Bryman 2001: 143). Simmons in (Gilbert 2001: 92) also suggests that open questions can be useful when investigating a new research problem. If the topic has not warranted previous investigation, the amount of knowledge needed to devise closed questions may not be available. In this case an open question can explore the topic with greater depth.

The uses of closed questions in questionnaires also have their advantages. It is easy to process coded answers, comparability between questions is assured and clarity of meaning is increased (Bryman 2001: 145, see Hammersley *et al.* 1997). Closed questions are also less time consuming for the respondents (Simmons in Gilbert 2001: 92), which is beneficial to a researcher with a set time frame. The choice of open or closed questions will ultimately depend on nature of the research and whether any time limits are enforced.

If the research proposal includes a number ambiguous or predominantly subjective variables, it may be necessary to assess them in a variety of ways. Multiple indicators allow the researcher to develop many questions to investigate the same concept. Single questions may incorrectly classify individuals, may only touch on a fraction of the concept or be too general (Bryman 2001: 67). Using multiple indicators can enhance the reliability and validity of the measurement.

In general Bryman's (*ibid.*: 150-2) rules of thumb for designing questions are as follows. Avoid ambiguous terms, long questions, double-barrelled questions, very general questions, leading questions, the inclusion of negatives, technical terms, and the reliance on long-term memory.

Preliminary work towards a suitable questionnaire design began with simple brainstorming of the research questions: what do I want to find out? Careful consideration of reliability and replicability governed the selection and design of each question to ensure clear instructions and ease of understanding. Consequently, appropriately selected and defined variables ensure accurate measurement, and would add to the validity of the research.

The central element to the design of the questionnaires was the notion of risk. As the desired results would provide a concept of risk based on the opinions of young people, the best way of achieving this was to be via open questions. The term risk is a subjective term which may be understood in different ways by young people. As it was this exact relationship under investigation, no actual definition of the term was necessary.

An open question standing alone may have been too confusing or demanding and may have been missed out. Therefore the risk question was split into an introductory closed question that could be analysed statistically, followed directly by an open question that would provide more detailed qualitative data.

9. Have you ever taken a risk?

Yes	*Go to question 10*	☐
No	*Go to question 11*	☐
Don't know	*Go to question 11*	☐

10. What kinds of things have you done that involved taking a risk? (Write your answers on the dotted lines below)

....

....

This question is one of the most important in the questionnaire. To avoid bias from other questions, this question was placed directly after the introductory demographic questions.

It was also agreed that the use of multiple indicators of 'risk' would strengthen any analysis of research question one. The benefits of using multiple-indicators measures were appealing in the study of risk. Because risk can be an ambiguous concept, using different measures for the single concept was advantageous. Therefore, using a similar format, questions were also asked about doing something dangerous, being seriously injured (where they went to hospital), getting in trouble at school, upsetting parents and upsetting a best friend. These questions were designed to link specifically to each section and each topic of the questionnaire (described below) and were distributed logically throughout.

As noted the crux of the questionnaires were five biases of decision making. Each bias (optimism, experience, knowledge, peer approval, and parental concern) provided a

platform for detailed analysis. There were two distinct question designs used to collect data based on these predetermined biases. Initially the data was to be incorporated into a vignette. Each respondent would follow a selection of closed answers and 'go to' keys to suggest how an imaginary character would respond in certain situations. Each vignette would include three questions about decisions being made at a party, at school (twice), at home, and at a local hang out. This resolved in five vignettes, one for each predefined bias. To reduce the complexity of answering the vignette questions, the general topic remained the same. It was decided that this topic would be the use of cannabis.

Each vignette was followed by an open question. In addition, to gather more information about the *personal* beliefs of the respondents (in comparison with the hypothetical situations), a selection of questions were designed based again on each bias. Each question included 11 different 'risky' activities (including smoking cannabis) which had been asked about in the vignettes.[11] Most of the topics were selected based on previous risk and adolescence research. For example the drugs questions were of particular interest to the researcher, and could be compared with the main theme of cannabis. The playing truant question was of particular interest to the school. Rock climbing was included to represent a 'risky' sport (noted in much of the sensation seeking literature).

Activity tables were constructed which allowed the respondent to answers on a 5 point Likert type scale (e.g. strongly agree to strongly disagree), and included a 'don't know' response. Each question was based on the five biases. For example, the vignette constructed about parental concern was followed by an activity table that asked

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[11] The 11 activities were smoking cannabis, drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, riding a motorcycle, playing truant, not wearing a seatbelt, rock climbing, using heroin, taking ecstasy, shoplifting, and vandalism.

How *upset would your parents/guardians be* if they found out you had done any of the following activities?

(Tick the boxes, like this: ☑ or leave them blank if you do not understand the question)

Then as mentioned the risk-based open question followed.

31. Have you ever done something that upset your parents/guardians?

Yes	*Go to question 32*	☐
No	*Go to question 33*	☐

32. What kinds of things have you done that upset your parents/guardians? (Write your answers on the dotted lines below)

....

....

The literature suggested that there is a positive relationship between the perception of risk and personal prevalence in the activity. Thus it was decided that information gained on the actual experience of the respondents would be beneficial. Hence, the final two questions (designed in the same format as the activity tables) asked the respondents

45. Have you *ever tried* any of the following?

46. Which of the following would you *like to try*, if you have not tried already?

These questions elicit the most sensitive information from the questionnaire, and in respect of this, were purposefully placed at the end. This would hopefully deter respondents from becoming alarmed at the questions and refusing to continue.

Open questions can be time consuming, they require greater effort from respondents who may miss them out; and they may be difficult to code (Bryman 2001: 143). Closed questions can repress the spontaneity of answers, it can be difficult to assure answers are mutually exclusive, or exhaustive and respondent interpretation of each question may differ (Bryman 2001: 146). Specific problems with the questionnaire design were highlighted from the pilot study, and will be addressed in the following section.

3.83. Presentation and Layout

> An attractive layout is likely to enhance response rates, whereas the kinds of tactics that are sometimes employed to make a questionnaire appear shorter than it really is – such as reducing margins and the space between questions – make it look cramped and thereby unattractive. Also if questions are too close together, there is a risk of a tendency for them to be inadvertently omitted.
>
> (Dillman 1983 in Bryman 2001: 133)

Presentation is a juggling of extremes, ultimately founded on common sense. At the very least Bryman recommends a variety of print styles, used consistently and in an appropriate manner (e.g. same font for questions and all instructions in bold) (*ibid.*: 134). It is also suggested that closed answers should be presented vertically to avoid confusion, clear instruction should follow on how to respond, and questions should

never be split over two separate pages (ibid: 136). The ordering of questions should also be carefully considered.

> Questions should not only fit together but also be grouped together according to subject. If the ordering of questions is unpredictable it will frustrate respondents and make the study appear ill-considered and amateurish.

> (Simmons in Gilbert 2001: 98).

As the questionnaires were administered in school (not mailed) the presentation was not vital in ensuring initial response rate. Rather the presentation and layout had to attract the students and keep them engaged. Each questionnaire was A4 in size, with no smaller than 12-point font. Before the questions a statement of confidentiality and instructions on completion were highlighted in large bold boxes. Instructions throughout were often in bold or placed in a box. Each page was numbered, with an instruction to turn over at the bottom. After the last question the respondents were asked to place their sheets in the provided envelope and thanked for their time. Overall the layout was presented in a logical fashion, a mixture of each type of question, rather than a section of the same, made completion more interesting

The questionnaire was long and did not allow for the questions to be well spread out. It was decided that contained questions rather than a mass of A4 sheets would be the most desirable. The length also meant that pages were back to back which could lead to confusion during completion.

3.84. Piloting

It is essential that self-completion questionnaires are piloted. There is usually no interviewer aiding completion, so any errors would result in a great waste of time, effort

and resources. Pilot studies tease out irregularities in the flow of the questionnaire and any questions which are misunderstood or missed out (Bryman 2001: 155).

- Pilot 1 – Alternative comprehensive school

The first stage of the first pilot study was carried out at a secondary school, similar in size to the selected sample school, and under the same Local Education Authority. The researcher knew a teacher at the school and informal access was discussed initially. A formal letter was drafted to this contact, explaining the purpose of the pilot study, and a copy was forwarded to the departmental head. Access was agreed on the basis that confidentiality would be assured.

In application, this pilot study involved the distribution of draft 10 of the questionnaire. Five teachers from the selected school were given a questionnaire pack on 24[th] January 03. The pack contained a copy of the questionnaire, a set of questions to answer and a comments sheet. All the sampled teachers taught Y9-Y13 students. The packs were completed[12] and returned on 28[th] January 2003.

The teachers were asked to read the questionnaires, bearing in mind their least academic Y9 student. They were then asked to comment on use of language; (would they understand words such as 'confidential', 'approve', 'approached', 'injured', 'risk', or understand concepts such as 'joyriding', 'shoplifting'); layout; and general level of interest

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[12] One pack was not completed.

The second stage of the first pilot study occurred during the same time period. Five Y13 students, in one class, volunteered to complete the questionnaire. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire and comment on, for example, the lifestyle questions, argot names for cannabis, the ease of understanding and the word 'risk'. Instead of getting the students to write their answers, the researcher held a focus group on 28th January, which lasted approximately 30 minutes.

- Pilot 2 – Youth club

The second stage of the piloting process commenced on the 12th February 2003. The sampled school held an independent youth club twice a week. The youth worker in charge of organising this youth club was contacted via telephone during the previous week.[13] The aim of the study and the relationship with the school and the Head teacher was outlined and a meeting was coordinated. It was arranged that the researcher could be present during the youth club to talk to the young people present and questionnaires could be distributed to willing volunteers. Nine questionnaires were completed (6 males and 3 females), ranging from 11 to 16 years of age. The approximate completion time was noted as 20 minutes. No audio recording was possible due to there being too much background noise.

There were many distractions in the youth club, with music on, and other students around to talk to and be distracted by. However the majority of the students sat and filled in the questionnaires without coercion and gave their full attention. Some found it a little long but completed it anyway. One student became noticeably bored and

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[13] Details were freely available on the youth club website.

answered the tick boxes at the end with 'don't know'. This is noted as more to do with the surroundings than the questionnaire.

The youngest student, who *asked* if he could fill it in, was 11 years old. The questionnaires had been designed for older students and this was explained. However he experienced few difficulties with wording and answered the tick boxes well. The scenarios were a little too complicated but he did read them all fully and did not become bored with the process.

The pilot studies were an essential part of the design process and raised concerns that were not considered by the researcher. However, the feedback was perhaps not as extensive as liked. During pilot one, the teachers were very keen to write their comments, but face-to-face interviews would have produced better explanations of their thoughts. The older students were forthcoming with their comments, however a greater number of subjects my have facilitated a broader discussion.

Pilot two also produced some interesting findings. The problems here were the number of distractions, which meant that a detailed discussion with the subjects was not always possible. This was due to the choice of the venue, which was primarily a place to relax and have fun, not a place to be interviewed or complete work.

There was also no extensive pilot of the focus groups, hindered by time and planning constraints.

3.85. Design Problems

The pilot studies raised a number of concerns about the design of the questionnaire.

❑ Pilot One – Stage One

Hobbies (Q5)

'Better as an open question' 'Maybe they need examples of hobbies/ sports'

Peer approval activity table (Q15)

'Rather than 'friends approve', could be 'what would the reaction of your friends be?'

Parental concern vignette (Q29)

'do nothing' is ambiguous. Perhaps say 'Do you think Adam will not tell his parents and hope they don't find out?'

All vignettes

'Instead of 'Will Adam' use 'Do you think Adam'

General

'Students may get bored as a bit long and a lot of similar questions'

'Very long, may get bored towards the end, therefore the last few might be answered quickly'

'Do think they will engage with the stories. It may be quite long but the tasks are varied and they don't have to write much'

❑ Pilot One – Stage Two

The students in this pilot study suggested that a question on work/wages could be included, or if not, the pocket money question needed higher categories for older students. They noted that the local street names for cannabis were gange or ganga, which should be included. In the activity tables 'drinking alcohol' did not state how much and Q46 (which of the following would you like to try) should included 'that you haven't tried already'. On the whole they thought the open questions were good, but they were sometimes confused as to what to write or what was relevant. A full transcript of the focus group was completed.

❑ Pilot Two

Completed questionnaires were analysed for problems. From the data given it was noticed that the categories for Q6 (pocket money) were too low, with the majority of the sample falling into the top two categories. All students had heard of the drug, further questioning found the main street names to be gange, marijuana and dope.

The vignettes needed to be analysed to ensure that they were being answered correctly. Seven out of the 9 students followed the question paths correctly. Two out of 9 students answered 'don't know' for the majority of the questions. This was a reasonably low figure suggesting that the majority read and understood the questions.

The activity tables also needed revision. 2 students said it was not clear that they needed to tick the boxes, and instructions would help. It is also clear from the completed questionnaires that some found it difficult to follow the lines and tick the

corresponding boxes. This was verified by talking to one of the students. A clearer layout of the tables was necessary. One student did not know the meaning of 'joyriding'. One student did not know the meaning of 'injecting'. One student did not know the meaning of 'ecstasy'. These terms needed rephrasing, with clear instructions to follow if the meaning was not understood.

With regard to the open questions, most students simply described their injury, rather than explaining how they did it, which indicated a problem with the wording. There was also need to clarify whether the respondents could write more than one answer.

The risk question was answered badly with all students simply listing activities that had previously been mentioned in the tick box questions. The decision to re-place this question at the beginning of the questionnaire was taken based on this analysis.

3.9. Focus Group Design

Morgan (1993: 36) notes the process of focus group design, and advises any researcher to start with clarification of the key concepts to be investigated. Furthermore, 'the general concepts to be explored need to be formulated as a set of discussion guidelines that can be used by the moderator during the focus group sessions'. In his study on aging, Knodel (in *ibid.*: 37) uses guidelines which are ' general in nature, open-ended, and seek to find out what is going on without specifically asking directly about the situation of the individual participants'.

> However, if comparisons are to be made across differently defined subgroups, relatively detailed guidelines ... can help ensure that similar points are discussed across groups

(ibid.)

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There is some debate about the optimum number of sessions used in each study. Aside from obvious time and money constraints, the number of sessions is dependent on the nature of proposed analytical comparisons. The moderator should not convey a position of authority. Krueger & Casey (2000: 26) suggest that as rule of thumb, three or focus groups should be planned. It would then be necessary to determine whether the data has reached saturation – i.e. no new data is being obtained. If comparisons are necessary between groups, start with three or four groups for each variable (e.g. male and female groups) and analyse the quality of the data.

Denscombe's (2001a, 2001b) study of health risk in young people began with self completion questionnaires, distributed in school, to mixed ability tutor groups in one school year (Y11). His final sample consisted of 1,648 questionnaires. This data was followed up by 20 focus groups, of 4-7 participants; sampling 123 students aged 15 and 16 years of age. The participants were volunteers who were told the purpose of the study. The discussions lasted approximately 1 hour.

> The structured beginning to the focus groups also involved the presentation of certain data arising from the survey part of the research ... The presentation of these findings at this point served two distinct purposes. First, it provided an opportunity to validate the results with the young people themselves. Second, the introduction of the data acted as a 'prompt' to spark discussion on specific topics.

> (Denscombe 2001b: 162)

Denscombe notes (2001b: 163) that these focus groups were not a representative sample. Due to anonymity of the questionnaires, specific students could not be targeted. However a mix of opinions and behaviours were necessary. Subsequently, teachers were asked to select the participants of the focus groups.

These people also needed to express a willingness to participate; an ungrudging willingness to participate was considered essential on ethical grounds. This pragmatic basis for selection of focus group participants ... however, inevitably had an impact on the representativeness of the participants.

(*ibid.*)

Krueger & Casey (2000: 40) state the following qualities of a sound focus group question.

- ❏ A conversational style
- ❏ Uses colloquial language
- ❏ Easy to verbalise
- ❏ Clear in their direction
- ❏ Short
- ❏ Open ended
- ❏ One dimensional

The qualities of a good questioning route are also noted.

- ❏ An easy beginning
- ❏ Follows a sequence
- ❏ Uses the time wisely

The authors also note that the 'why?' questions should be avoided wherever possible (2000: 58). Asking why makes the respondents rationalise the answer and provokes a common sense answer rather relying on impulse. Instead, 'what' or 'how' to induce feelings can remove the sense of interrogation.

The methodology of the present study was heavily influenced by the work of Denscombe (2001a, b). After Phase I of the research was completed, it was obvious that the sample size was not as large as expected. Thus, the second stage would need to add to the quality of the data. During the questionnaire design it was noted that the vignettes did not allow for the respondents to say why they had made each decision. It was not possible to include such a questionnaire due to maintaining the interest of the respondent and the overall the length of the questionnaire. In addition, there has been

research which suggests that prolonged deliberation of the reasons for decisions can affect the quality of the choices made (McMackin & Slovic 2000). For that reason the formulation of rapid decisions by the respondents can also justify this decision. It was therefore decided that a more detailed investigation into reasoning and decision-making would be conducted in focus groups.

The structure of the focus groups followed a standard pattern. The respondents were welcomed into the allocated room and the nature of the discussion outlined to them along with ethical considerations. Each vignette was distributed to the respondents and read out by the facilitator. The participants were asked to comment on each situation and give reasons for their answers. During transcription these conversations were analysed for evidence of each of the risk perception theories, and any additional influencing factors.

In addition to the vignettes and the biases of judgment, the initial research question, the concept of risk, could also be expanded on. The data gathered from the risk and danger questions in the questionnaires were complied into a database. It was then possible to identify the most popular risk and danger activities for both sexes. A selection of pairs of activities was created based on this information. Handouts were created consisting of such and distributed to the respondents. Wherever possible the most popular activities were used. However 'playing in hay bales' was one such activity. It was decided that this activity was unique (compared with the most common, such as drinking alcohol, stealing), and if it had been included the respondents from Phase I might have realised the connection. Issues of confidentiality would then be breached and the focus groups

would suffer. Due to the difference in male and female risk taking, two different sets of activities were paired together[14].

After the vignettes had been discussed, the participants were asked if they understood the word risk. A brief discussion followed which informed the participants that they would then be asked to suggest which activity they thought was the most risky? And which activity they would prefer to do? Each pair of activities cited on the handouts were then discussed in turn lead by the aforementioned questions. If the discussion finished all the set questions well before the 50-minute time limit, the researcher would introduce similar questions on risk, leisure activities and the use of cannabis.

As the research had set itself multiple research questions the majority had to be addressed in the focus groups. This meant that much of the data did not delve into enough depth, as some of the discussions were brief and many of the factors were assumed.

As previously stated, asking respondents 'why?' will produce a range of answers. It is possible that participants gave the 'correct' answer, one which they had time to think about. In reality this does not occur. However, these groups did prompt discussion of the *possibilities* which young people face when making decisions, which was rich data in itself.

Due to the make up of the participants, individuals may have been reluctant to give honest opinions, or peers could have influenced answers *during the session.* In addition any comments made about the validity of teachers or education could have

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[14] The focus group schedule used here can be found in Appendix E.

been skewed by the surroundings. Single interviews would have addressed many of these issues, and more detailed discussions of the more sensitive issues, at a personal level, may have been achieved. Due to time and access limitations this was not possible.

3.10. Reliability, Replication and Validity

The researcher was keen to adhere to issues of reliability, replication and validity throughout the design and implementation of this study. The researcher is confident that the study is replicable. A longitudinal design would have proved beneficial to this research, noting a possible change in the concept of risk over time. If at any stage this were desired, the methodology would allow it.

Can the study be replicated? The study has produced an explicit account of the design and it would strengthen any conclusion to be replicated, in another school or schools, and in different areas of the country.

Can the integrity of the conclusions be questioned? The research design is based largely on variables taken from previous research. They have been tested before and adequately reflect the concepts that the research attempts to denote. The variables have been tightly constructed into measures to allow any relationships to be adequately substantiated. Any generalisations are limited to the research subjects, however this limitation is overruled by the exploratory nature of the research. The validity of the research has been assured by the inclusions of specific research instruments (the vignettes) that represent (better than most) the social context of everyday lives.

3.11. Creation of Vignettes

The creation and justification for using such a tool has been given additional focus here. The uses of vignettes in social research have become increasingly popular in recent years. Their purpose is to place the respondent in an information gathering position which is 'closely approximate to a real life decision-making or judgement-making situation' Alexander & Becker (1978: 93).

> Vignettes are short descriptions of a person or a social situation which contain precise references to what are thought to be the most important factors in the decision-making...process of respondents. Thus, rather than allowing or requiring respondents to impute such information themselves in reacting to simple, direct, abstract questions about the person or situation, the additional detail is provided by the researcher and is thereby standardised across respondents.
>
> (Alexander & Becker 1978: 94)

Traditional social research methods, specifically used to elicit data about beliefs and values (for example attitude statements) are criticised for not attempting to deduce such data in a contextualised way Finch (1987: 105). By using vignettes the researcher is acknowledging that meanings are situationally specific. During data collection 'Ambiguity is a positive virtue, since it leaves space for the respondent to define the situation in their own terms' (ibid.: 112).

The most common element in the vignette is the hypothetical situation, although the composition of the method may change. Used predominantly in interviews, the number of vignettes used has varied from 50 (Alves & Rossi 1978) with 1 question asked about each one on a ranking scale; to 8 (Cook 1979), with 5 questions asked about each vignette and answers coded as simply as yes, no or don't know. Finch concluded that using 4 complex vignettes is the maximum for a single interview. (1987: 109). In addition to use in interviews, written narratives, asking respondents what they think will

happen next, are now one of the most common ways to format vignettes. King (1999) notes that vignettes are now becoming popular in focus group discussions usually as icebreakers, although there is little literature available to date

Each vignette incorporates certain changes built into the story, and usually asks the respondent to comment on what would happen next. The format of the questions follow 'What should *these people* do next?' rather than 'What would *you* do next?' The optimum format is suggested as 3 changes at most from the original scenario before respondents lose track of the story (*ibid.*). Finch also included an open-ended question in each vignette to deduce 'why' they had chosen their answer (*ibid.*). Vignette experiences are undoubtedly different to real life experiences (for example, the amount of thought that would go into the decisions is often not possible in real life). However, can any research tool truly reflect people's real life experiences? Vignettes simply provide an alternative interpretation of the real world by providing a situational context in which to respond to problems.

Strengths of Vignettes	Weaknesses of Vignettes
Distances the respondent from sensitive issues	Difficult to construct to aid understanding
Can elicit generalised answers rather than reliance on own experiences	Characters and situations must be believable
Maps decision making	All analysis is based on interpretation
Shows how decisions constrain future choices	How does one know which of the specific elements in the hypothetical situation are triggering a particular response?

(Finch 1987: 110)

The final weakness 'How does one know which of the specific elements in the hypothetical situation are triggering a particular response?' has no clear solution other

than maintaining tight controls on the question design, systematically changing one variable per question.

Evidently, the choice of research method is highly dependent on the nature of the research. The non-personal aspect used to cover sensitive issues such as suicide, rape, relationship violence, and deviance (Hughes 1998: 383). Vignettes have also proved beneficial in researching young people, not least because they offer a different and often fun way of answering researchers questions. King (1999) notes that 'the more inappropriate or controversial the behaviour featured in the vignette, the more confident participants will feel about offering a response'.

3.111. Examples of Use

Sophisticated quantitative analysis of available 'real world' data and hypothetical models in the absence of such data is the hallmark of risk analysis. As Mazur notes, in discussing the assessment of risks associated with nuclear power plants, 'Since there was little experience ... upon which to base empirical risk assessments ... hypothetical reliability models would fill the gaps in real world data.

(Short 1984: 713)

Recently, and in relation to adolescent risk behaviours, Thornton *et al.* (2002) used vignettes to study willingness to have unprotected sex. Hypothetical situations were created involving the respondent imagining being with a date that wanted to have sex. They were then asked to rate how willing they would be to participate in a series of actions (for example to have sex without contraception).

Hughes (1998: 382,389) application of vignette technique for studying drug injecting and concerns about HIV, used one lengthy vignette used in a story-book fashion. Questions were asked by an interviewer, periodically, to gain opinions about the

situation, coupled with 'Have you ever found yourself in this situation?' to introduce real life experiences.

McKeganey *et al.* (1995: 1254) note that large quantitative studies of drug injectors risk behaviour does not 'enable us to measure the influence of those contextual factors identified in our qualitative work'; vignettes sought to rectify this problem. This research team created vignettes based on actual situations accounted in previous research. Each scenario began with 'Now I want you to imagine' and offered two possible responses.

Curtner-Smith *et al.* (1994) used 10 hypothetical dilemmas in their questionnaire to assess susceptibility of adolescents to antisocial peer pressure. For each situation the respondents noted a choice of two possible behavioural responses, and then were asked to rate how certain they were of their decision.

Kalafat *et al.* (1993 in Hughes 1998: 382) used vignettes in self-completion questionnaires to assess the responses of 314 school students to suicidal peers. Four vignettes were offered, with students recording their responses to what they thought would happen next, how they would react in the situation, and what the average student would do. In addition, using a Likert scale, the respondents were asked to note how concerned they would be.

Dolcini *et al.* (1989: 412) also used 12 vignettes to measure response on the 'Imaginary Audience Scale' (measurement of self consciousness), contributing to conclusions on egocentrism. Each vignette depicted a potentially embarrassing situation and

respondents were asked to suggest their response from a list of three alternatives (where response 1 indicates low self consciousness, response 3 being high).

Stewart & Hemsley (1984: 119) studied the relationship between personality factors and the perception of criminal risks. They devised 18 hypothetical situations where the 'objective risk' was a function of three factors; the probability of being caught in the act; the severity of the punishment; and whether the consequences would occur sooner or later.

Jensen *et al.* (1978: 75), although not using the term vignette, used a series of hypothetical situations to measure the perceived risk of punishment (for example 'Suppose you and your friends were messing around one night and they decided to break into a place and steal some things'). Respondents were asked to comment on whether they would commit the act but not get caught, via 5 coded responses, from definitely yes, to defiantly not.

Evidence of use in practical settings, rather than for research purposes has been found within prisons. Prisoners under the guidance of Staffordshire Probation Service were set moral dilemmas (e.g. A neighbour is beating up his wife. Do you call the police?) as part of an Enhanced Thinking Skills Programme. The aim was to educate offenders on the morality of real life situations, including the perspective of the victim (BBC news 3/12/2001).

Hasbro developed a childrens' game called Scruples based on the vignette scenario. In large groups, questions were posed for which a volunteer would answer and explain their reasons. The American inventor, Sheldon Berman felt it necessary to develop

through play an understanding of how young people perceive and learn how to make particular decisions (Berman 2000). The following questions are examples from the game.

An old person gets on your bus. All the seats are taken. Do you give up your seat?
You accidentally scratch a neighbours car with your bike. Do you admit that you did?
Some of your older friends are smoking cigarettes. They tell you to try it once. Do you take a puff?

3.112. Why Use Vignettes for Investigating Risk?

> future research needs to examine adolescent risk perceptions in the light of the social context (e.g. family, peer group, school etc) in which they develop. A contextual understanding of adolescent risk perception may be required to understand the social reality of the adolescent to the degree necessary for the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies
>
> Benthin *et al.* (1993: 167)

Specifically in relation to risk perception Barnett & Breakwell note that 'it is important to develop and understanding of the context in which particular variables have effects (2001: 172). The aforementioned methodology was also based on the consideration of these quotes.

3.12. Data Analysis

Initial data analysis from Phase I, as stated, involved the open questions and was necessary to create the schedules for the focus groups. Databases were created for each open questions and reports generated. The remaining questions in the questionnaire were transferred into SPSS and data input commenced. After the necessary recoding for the purpose of 2x2 crosstabulations, the data was analysed starting with univariate frequencies and graphical representations followed by bivariate analysis.

The focus groups were recorded and manually transcribed by the researcher. Each respondent was given a corresponding letter of the alphabet and the facilitator was noted as #. The content of the eight transcripts were then analysed for evidence of the 5 risk perception factors. Notes were made in the margins of any additional similarities or differences between groups (gender and age).

The vignette responses for Phase I and Phase II were then complied and discussed. The remaining data was then aligned with the stated research questions.

Throughout the remaining chapters evidence from this data collection will be presented alongside theoretical investigation to aid the exploration of the aforementioned research questions.

Summary

3.0.

- The selected school teaches pupils from 11-18. It provides evidence of above average attainment up to age 16 and below average for post 16. The immediate surrounding area is not ethnically diverse. Key concerns for young people and crime include graffiti, alcohol use, anti-social behaviour and motorcycle use.

- Access to the school was acquired via the Headteacher, although complications arose when this contact was devolved upon his resignation. Access to the pupils was negotiated as one 50 minute Tutorial lesson per week.

3.1.

- The research design consisted of self completion questionnaires and focus groups.

3.2.

- The school was sampled by convenience. The pupils were sample in tutor groups by systematic random sampling. The initial sample was 212. The focus groups were sampled from the previous tutor groups and were selected voluntarily or by the teacher.

3.3.

- Consent forms were sent to the initial sample. 20 forms were returned requesting non-participation.

3.4.

- Ethical considerations including confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw were appropriately dealt with.

3.5.

- The time scale for Phase I was 20 March 2003 – 8 April 2003. The time scale Phase II was 13 November 2003 – 25 February 2004.

3.6.

- The researcher was present for most of the time during the questionnaire completion. For all other times the teacher was briefed about necessary conduct. The research as facilitator negotiated a moderate to high level of facilitation during the focus groups.

3.7.

- The questionnaires were completed in the normal classroom sat at opposite ends of a desk. The focus groups were positioned in alternative, private access rooms.

3.8.

- The questionnaires consisted of demographic variables, vignettes, Likert scale tables and open questions.

3.9.

- The focus groups were constructed from an analysis of Phase I data and followed a structured schedule.

3.10.

- The methodology took note of validity and is confident that replication is possible.

3.11.

- The vignettes were chosen due to their applicability to the context of decision making and the concept of risk.

3.12.

- Data analysis was carried out via the use of databases for the open questions, SPSS for the coded questionnaire variables and content analysis of the transcribed focus groups.

Risk Taking and the Context of the Sample

The evidence presented in Chapter Two describes a situation to which one might apply the label of 'young risk takers'. This research also collected primary data on a selection of these activities to provide some comparable context to the accessed sample.

4.0. The Chosen Sample

Firstly some comment on the nature of the chosen sample. Given that we are now caught up in an age where risk has become normalised (see section 5.21), it is no longer essential to study the disadvantaged, problematic, or at-risk youth. As Miles (2000) suggests, the traditional focus on extreme cases has given rise to concepts being applied to youth as a whole. The reliance on material from subcultures to describe the conditions of youth is becoming less relevant in postmodern society. This research does not focus specifically on an at-risk subsection of young people. The cross section used represents all school attending youth, rather than identifying a specific subculture of risk. This decision is in line with Miles' thoughts that 'the notion of youth *lifestyles* is now potentially far more useful than that of youth subcultures' (1997: 7).

4.1. Participation in 'Risky' Activities

Providing a snap shot of the behaviour of the sample allows links to be made between involvement in different risk activities.

Graph 4.0 The percentage of respondents who had ever tried the following activities
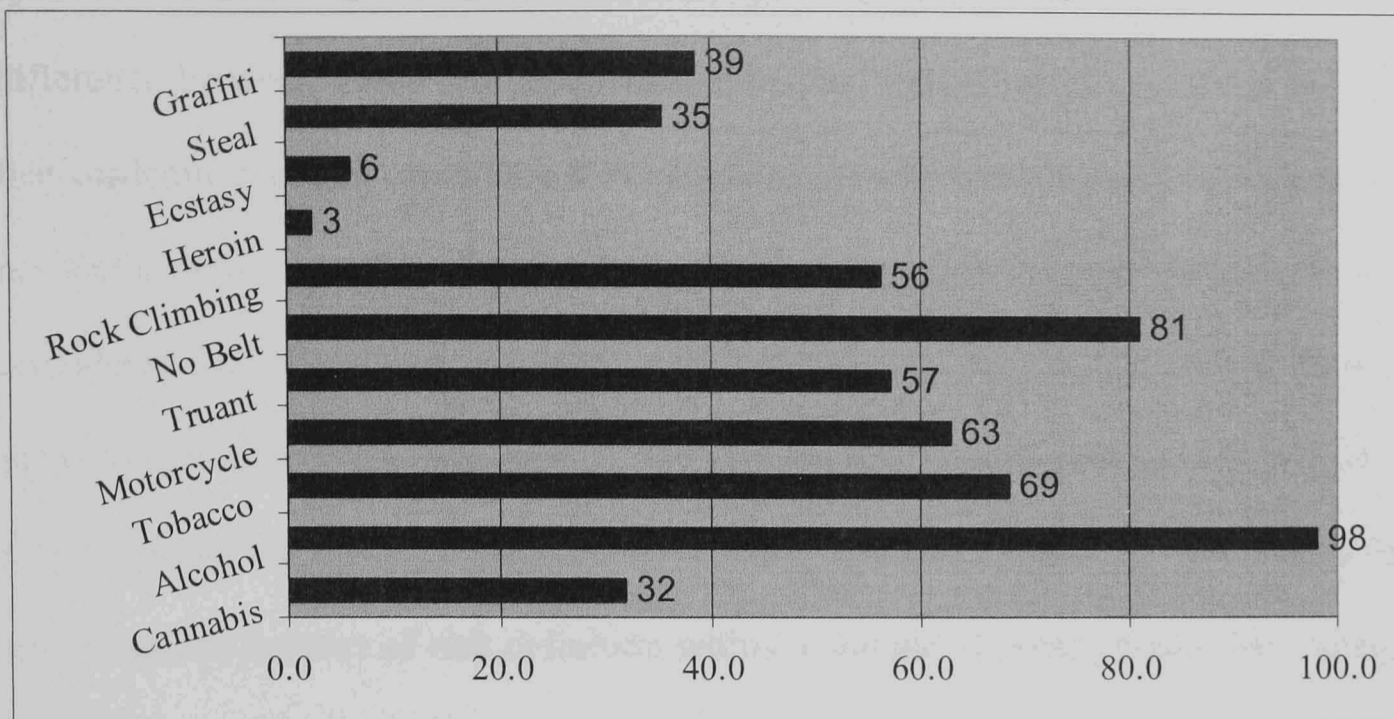
It is clear that those acts which had some level of social acceptance for adults and amongst adolescents (alcohol, tobacco, not wearing a seatbelt) and those with some sporting connection (motorcycle, rock climbing) were the most popular. Truanting also scored highly, an activity that has been perceived as acceptable behaviour by young people (Jones & Francis 1994: 225). Although not applicable to adulthood the connection via absenteeism from the workplace may suggest a similar concept. Those activities that are traditionally defined as socially unacceptable (primarily in terms of legality) were noted at the opposite end of the scale. It is conceded from the secondary evidence (sections 2.11. – 2.17.) and this primary data collection that young people are engaging in activities that can be grouped under the umbrella of risk, irrespective of either positive or negative consequences. Although useful as primary data, such results do not provide the context of definition, or any explicit relationship with the term risk, that is required to further this discussion.

Often when addressing young people we research *them* rather than their attitudes. The youth discourse 'embodies (if only implicitly) a claim to 'know' and 'own' the experiences, concerns and opinions of young people' (Loader 1996: 25). Furthermore

specific literature on adolescent risk behaviour has assumed, because no significant difference between youth and adult definitions had been observed (Alexander 1990), that academic research could take it for granted. To apply therefore, not only the above academic definitions, but also the descriptions which this research created, was not considered wholly appropriate. Such youth lifestyles are very diverse and reflexive and yet unique to individual members. It was decided that the self definition of risk by the subject group was essential as a precursor to any detailed analysis. Therefore to fully appreciate the context of risk definition within a sample of young people this research attempted to address this issue by allowing the respondents to define risk themselves. With limited bias from previous questions or introduction to the real focus of the survey, the young people were asked if they had ever taken a risk, and if so, if they could identify what that activity entailed. These results were analysed in terms of frequency and gender difference and specifically incorporated into further focus group discussions. In doing so this study can be confident in its relationship to the first research question.

4.2. The Self-Definition of Risk and Associated Terms

As this study involved exploratory research, the researcher did not want to limit this exploration by creating elaborate hypotheses. However, it was assumed that the types of activity that would arise would include those which have been studied extensively under the umbrella of adolescent risk taking (sections 2.11 – 2.17). The most interesting responses would be those outside the remit of academic focus, those which adults would not consider as risky, or those which would not fall into any of the pre-determined definitions.

The survey respondents were asked if they had ever taken a risk. If they answered positively they were encouraged to give examples of the types of activity they were envisaging. Multiple responses were allowed. All answers given were analysed and categorised into 14 groups according to their similarities (see Appendix A for detailed classification). Titles for those categories were selected by the researcher based on a broad classification of the activities contained within them.

Table 4.0 Types of Risk

	Total	% Of Total
Health	18	13.3
Sports and Leisure	24	17.8
Disobeying Parents	16	11.9
Stunts and Play	17	12.6
Association with Others	6	4.4
Wrong Place, Wrong Time	10	7.4
Roads	9	6.7
Transport	16	11.9
Criminal Acts	8	5.9
Helpful Acts	4	3.0
Disobeying the School	4	3.0
Life Choices	1	0.7
Cosmetic	1	0.7
Unknown.	1	0.7
Total	135	100

The above table shows the percentage of all the responses devoted to each category. The most prevalent categories were Sports and Leisure, Health and Stunts and Play. It is interesting to note that the most common types of risk cited by the young people in this sample were related to Sports and Leisure. These risks involved individual and team competition, which are both perceived by older people as healthy adolescent activities. Furthermore, possible harm (e.g. sporting injuries) could be praised by adults

alike as signs of a well fought game. However, the literature on risk taking in adolescence often falls under the heading of problem behaviour. Contrarily, results presented here, those offered by adolescents themselves, show that the majority of their risk taking behaviour would not be classified in this manner.

The fact that the third most prevalent category was Stunts and Play reinforces these conclusions. The outcomes of such risks may not have long-term consequences, and may be temporal acts of experimentation. They are activities that may be 'grown out of' when the consequences no longer fulfil a rite of passage.

The key phrase again here linking the three most cited categories is the notion of social acceptability. Even though the second most prevalent category (Health) contains more of the traditional examples of 'problem behaviour', some of the specific acts have certain elements of social acceptability (alcohol use, and smoking). This conclusion links explicitly to those provided above. Not only do adolescent levels of prevalence (Graph 4.0) account for social acceptability, but this is also supported by their definitions of risk.

4.22. Risk and Danger

As previously mentioned, additional terms were included in the questionnaire primarily for comparative purposes, and to further the context of adolescent behaviour. A direct comparison has been made with the concept of danger, based on current academic discourse.

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The dictionary definition of danger is 'liability or exposure to harm or death'. In much of the literature surrounding risk, the notion of danger is implicitly present. The definition provided by this research describes a type of hazard; a state of danger, not explicitly referenced in terms of likelihood of consequences. But to what extent are the terms related? Do risky situations always involve an element of danger? Do dangerous situations always contain some level of risk?

The survey respondents were asked if they had ever done something dangerous. If they answered positively they were encouraged to give examples of the types of activity they were describing. Multiple responses were allowed. All answers given were analysed and categorised into 11 groups according to their similarities (see Appendix B for detailed classification). Titles for those categories were selected by the researcher based on a broad classification of the activities contained within them.

Table 4.1 Types of Danger

	Total	% Of Total
Stunts and Play	19	17.9
Health	19	17.9
Criminal Acts	11	10.4
Sports and Leisure	16	15.1
Transport	19	17.9
Association with Others	7	6.6
Roads	7	6.6
Wrong Place, Wrong Time	5	4.7
Disobeying Parents	1	0.9
Disobeying School	1	0.9
Job	1	0.9
Total	106	100

The above table shows the percentage of all the responses devoted to each category. The most prevalent categories were Stunts and Play, Health and Transport.

The dangerous acts cited predominantly included acts which could result in negative physical harm. Some comparisons can be made with the concept of risk. For example, cited as a risk by one respondent was 'taking economics at GCSE'. This involved the chances of failure and personal struggle, but would be unlikely to result in physical harm. Danger was predominantly related to a negative physical outcome, whereas risk acknowledged the possibility of a positive non-physical consequence. This distinction was paramount to defining risk and danger for these young people. The respondents were suggesting that it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to find acts that are dangerous, but do not have any level of risk (for example taking drugs, riding motorbikes and crossing the road when not safe were cited for both terms). It is, on the other hand, possible (although not common) to find acts that are risky but not dangerous (examples included academic choices as stated and truanting from school).

Furthermore the respondents' definitions of risk provided more evidence of sport related activities, whereas danger was more synonymous with stunts and playful acts. Here, in relation to negative outcomes the respondents were acknowledging that sports can harbour feelings of failure or personal underachievement which is harmonious to the concept of risk. These consequences were not as apparent within stunts and play, with the emphasis placed on possible physical rather than emotive harm as an indicator of danger.

This research has touched upon the possible similarities and differences between the concepts of risk and danger. During selected focus groups the respondents had their own views on the subject. There were those that distinguished a difference.

\# Is there any difference between doing something risky and something dangerous?

E   going in a room number thirteen

<div align="right">(mY10)</div>

\# Is there any difference between doing something risky and something dangerous?

M   risks, you could say gambling or summut like that

<div align="right">(mY10)</div>

For these young people, the given decisions did not overtly stress the possibility of physical harm. The issue of superstition is very interesting and is extremely subjective.

Superstition is a set of behaviours that may be faith based, or related to magical thinking, whereby the practitioner believes that the future, or the outcome of certain events, can be influenced by certain of his or her behaviours.

<div align="right">(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superstition)</div>

If we adhere to this definition, it can be applied accordingly with the definition of risk. Risk is the ability to influence outcomes. However the outcome is predominantly unknown, or at least allows for many diverse possibilities. Dangerous situations or hazards may involve an acknowledgement of what those outcomes might be.

In addition gambling in this context (it is believed that the respondent was referring to the most common image of gambling, synonymous with a casino), the immediate risk of monetary win or loss, may not provoke immediate harm. This is not to downplay the possible secondary consequences of gambling. Any literal definition, for which it is not assumed the respondent was referring to, could provoke different circumstances.

However, there were also those who did not agree with a solid distinction.

<div align="right">96</div>

D   if it's a risky thing to do then its dangerous isn't it, if your pushing yourself to the limits then its got to be dangerous hasn't it

In this context the respondent has automatically related the word risk to a physical act. This is not surprising given first, the breakdown of types of risk found in the survey methodology of this research (section 4.21), or second, that the respondent was male (see section 4.23).

B   risky could be something like walking into a police station and holding a gun up and running off, that isn't dangerous is it

D   yeh it is, you could walk into a police station and hold up a gun and the chances are they're gonna shoot at you aren't they

D   run away from the police, that's risky but not dangerous

B   I don't know they could have stun guns

In both cases above we again see that the primary consequence of the act is one of risk – the outcome is unknown. However it becomes obvious that in many risky situations the unpredictability of the outcome can lead to danger, in this case the reaction of another. Following this rationale it is difficult to distinguish between the two terms.

B   walking under some ladders, that's risky but its not dangerous

D   what if the ladder falls?

B   yeh but you would be able to get out of the way wouldn't you, it's meant to be bad luck if you walk under a ladder

Here we see the concepts of superstition again intertwined with primary risk and secondary danger due to the unpredictability of the outcome. Finally, and not surprisingly given the lack of clarity in the risk debate, there were those who used the two terms interchangeably to describe the same concept.

> \#   if I say something is risky do you know what I mean by that?
>
> T   dangerous?

(fY10)

In support of the link between the two variables, significance testing (Chi Squared, 1df = 3.52, p<.05) provided a value of .000 indicating that the relationship between risk and danger was statistically significant. Of those respondents who had taken a risk, a significant proportion had also done something dangerous.

4.23. Risk and Gender

In forthcoming chapters this research plays close attention to the 'environmental' and 'precipitating' factors of risk taking behaviour as outlined by Irwin (1993 in Davis 1999: 25). In addition it is considered appropriate to pass comment on one of the most influential 'biopsychosocial' factors. Although authors such as Beck (1992, detailed in Chapter Five) have negated the use of determining variables such as gender or class, this research will address the differences in context and definition of the two genders. This decision fell outside the philosophical remit of this research. However initial data analysis highlighted such differences that this discussion could not be overlooked. By doing so this section adheres to the suggestions of Furlong & Cartmel (1997) that such claims are perhaps exaggerated. Here differences in the conceptualisation of risk between genders will be investigated. The normalisation of risk (in terms of the

propensity for engagement) within youth as a distinct social category will be returned to in Chapter Five.

It has been suggested that gender is the strongest correlate of delinquent behaviour (Warr 2002: 114). In recent years gender differences in risk taking behaviour may have weakened, but are still considered a major predictor (Furlong & Cartmel 1997). Such distinctions arise in perception of risk and the choice of behaviour. It is a common assumption, and has been frequently reported, that young males are more likely to take risks than young females (Harre 2000: 206) and have a higher propensity for criminality (Warr 2002: 114), although this has been empirically challenged (Byrnes 2003: 15). If prevalence rates show that males are more risk taking we must consider that engagement in the same activity may actually be 'riskier' for women (consider sexual behaviour and pregnancy as a consequence). Therefore, in contemporary society males should not be classified as more risk taking than females, it should be suggested that they are simply prone to take certain types of risk, whereas females are prone to others (Byrnes 2003: 15).

The whole debate centres on the belief that men and women are faced with different risk taking opportunities, rather than differences in inclination (Chan 2002: 750). Taking sports as one example, young girls are not only segregated from competitive sports with males (e.g. football or rugby) but may also be restricted in their opportunity to access certain activities. Furlong & Cartmel (1997) cite the appropriateness of young girls entering snooker halls unaccompanied by male friends or relatives as one such example. This divide has developed from differences in traditional social roles and social maturity.

Young women [during adolescence] in particular are caught between dependence and independence by traditional norms and values that strain their premarital freedom of action beyond the parental home.

<div align="right">(Chisholm & Hurrelmann 1995: 132)</div>

Research from the late 1980s and early 1990s (cited in Furlong & Cartmel 1997) showed that girls tended to be less leisure focused, specifically in relation to sports and were restricted to help out at home, had stricter curfews and fewer recourses (e.g. pocket money). Heimer (1996: 39) also found that young females were predicted as being less delinquent due to higher levels of supervision and stronger bonds with their families. Such restrictions were tied to the idea of the feminine role. Hendry *et al.* (1993 in Furlong & Cartmel 1997: 55) found that young girls tended to show a dislike for collective team sports and preferred to spend leisure time with 'best friends'

Boys regard sporting activity as congruent with the masculine role and gain kudos from engaging in competition and aggressive leisure activities. On the other hand, girls tend not to connect sports activity with the process of becoming a woman.

<div align="right">(Coakley & White 1992 in *ibid.*: 55)</div>

Young girls, it has been found also tended to be more cooperative, whereas young boys may engage in an act without any real consideration for an other (Head 1997: 44). This is reinforced by evidence which suggests adolescent girls show stronger signs of empathy, whereas their male counterparts are often more exploitative (Lees 1987 in Head 1997: 45).

It could be suggested that traditional theories of gender differentiation based on socialisation are outdated. In contemporary society the roles of men and women are more fluid and diverse, as are the traditional roles of the family and methods of upbringing. However it is acknowledged that both genders engage in different patterns of risk taking and various possible explanations have been offered.

<div align="right">100</div>

On the whole exceptional risks, such as criminality, have occurred more frequently in males, and have occurred at a more serious level (Lenssen 2000: 287). Between 15 and 25 years of age, young females are more prone to eating disorders, depression and suicidal behaviours, whereas young males tend to exhibit criminal behaviour, alcohol and drug use (*ibid*.: 290). Hayward & Sharp (2003) found that compared to a fifth of females, a third of their male sample has committed an antisocial act in the previous year. Probable reasons for this trend are numerous but do include differences in the expression of aggression, and the age of sexual maturity (*ibid*.). Subsequently, or for other such reasons, young males are more attracted to the thrill of 'edgework' than their female counterparts and may in turn underestimate the risks involved in many of their ventures (Lyng 1990: 872).

In relation to fitness, females are generally healthier than boys during childhood, although this is reversed for adolescence. In addition, although boys are healthier they have higher mortality rates (Furlong & Cartmel 1997: 65). We could link this evidence to the types of risk taken, with males taking physical risks with more immediate risks of mortality. Data shows that young women are much less likely to choose to ride motorcycles than young men, perhaps highlighting this difference in risky choice (Bellaby & Lawrenson 2001: 372). Further evidence from Alexander *et al* (1990:562) showed that

> Although there was overlap in what males and females reported as risky behaviours, boys focused on more daring feats such as racing a dirt bike and walking across a bridge rail, while girls were more likely to indicate disobedience or rule breaking

If risk taking can be compared with accidents, evidence also shows that males are more likely to fall victim to accidents in childhood than females (Bellaby & Lawrenson 2001: 372), perhaps again highlighting the physical nature of leisure activities.

Research has been divided on the development of morality for adolescent males and females. Challenging previous accounts Gilligan (1982 in Head 1997: 92), supported by Warr (2002), suggested that

Moral development should be conceptualised as two different tasks for boys and girls. For the former, the problem is to move from a selfish ego-centric view to take account of others. For the latter, the task to contribute to the social matrix and emerge with some sense of autonomy.

In support of the above, Dolcini *et al.* (1989: 416) found that males' perceptions of risk were significantly lower than females and is credited to differences in experience. Correlations of risk perception and egocentrism were also lower for males than for females. This self image could be credited to the socialisation of the male identity and a need to hide feminine vulnerabilities.

However one must question the entire ethos of voluntary risk taking based on feminist notions of prescribed norms and expectations. Risky behaviour, it is suggested, is perhaps conditioned by a 'masculine lens' and normative connotations of what is 'risky' is recognised via male behaviour.

Moreover, when women do take exceptional risks, the tendency is to conflate women's exceptional risk taking with 'amorality' as in the case of promiscuity

Chan (2002: 743)

In contrast recent research has begun to acknowledge that female risk taking can have an identity of its own. Denscombe's work (2001a: 170) found that young female smokers portrayed a hard image congruent with the 1990's expression of 'girl power'.

Smoking would now seem to have a positive, proactive role to play in helping young women to assert their equality with boys and signify a spirit of independence and competitiveness.

Denscombe (2001a: 171)

The above results from this research could be separated into male and female responses for an analysis of gender differences (for a specific breakdown see Appendix A).

Table 4.3 Types of Risk By Sex

	Female	% Of Female Response	Male	% Of Male Response
Health	16	20.8	2	3.4
Sports and Leisure	10	13.0	14	24.1
Disobeying Parents	14	18.2	2	3.4
Stunts and Play	0	0.0	17	29.3
Association with Others	4	5.2	2	3.4
Wrong Place, Wrong Time	8	10.4	2	3.4
Roads	2	2.6	7	12.1
Transport	11	14.3	5	8.6
Criminal Acts	4	5.2	4	6.9
Helpful Acts	3	3.9	1	1.7
Disobeying the School	3	3.9	1	1.7
Life Choices	1	1.3	0	0.0
Cosmetic	1	1.3	0	0.0
Unknown.	0	0.0	1	1.7
Total	77	100	58	100

The above table shows that the most common acts for males were Stunts and Play, Sports and Leisure, and Roads. The most prevalent categories cited by females were Health, Disobeying Parents, and Transport. Only 9.6% of the activities cited were mentioned by both male and female respondents indicating that the majority of acts were specific to one gender, and were not participated in by both sexes.

There is a marked difference between the types of risks that are given by males and females. 20.8% of the total types of risks given by females were devoted to health risks.

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the most common type of risk noted. In comparison 29.3% of the total male response, the highest percentage, was devoted to Stunts and Play. Interestingly, females did not report that they engaged in stunts or playful risks.

Specifically in relation to male risk taking the influence of popular culture on adolescent identity is evident. The time scale of this data collection (2003) overlapped with the Channel 4 show and subsequent film 'Jackass'. This popular American show consisted of a group of 20-something males participating in a range of outrageous and dangerous stunts. The amateur video footage of their activities and their injuries constituted the entirety of the programme. Given that the most prevalent category of male risk taking was Stunts and Play the link between the featured activities and those cited by the respondents such as 'snorting alcohol' and 'jumping through flaming furniture' can be made. It cannot be proved that these acts would not have been prevalent without the influence of the show, however a connection is suggested.

The following definitions can be offered based on these results and complement the research done by Alexander (1990), and Lyng (1990).

The female concept of risk – There is a disobedient, or forbidden nature to the types of risks taken by females. Risk taking may involve the fun aspect only as a secondary concept behind some form of rebellion.

The male concept of risk – There is a certain infancy about the masculine concept of risk. The most popular risks do not tend to involve acts which would provoke punishment or condemnation. They are not overtly deviant, and involve more of the fun aspect to risk taking.

There are some examples of this divide noted by activities specific to one sex. Unprotected sex, underage clubbing, walking home late at night, and getting into boy's/stranger's cars were cited as risks by females and not males. Swimming, jumping from a roof, playing chicken, and going rock climbing were all cited as risks by males and not females.

In support of the views of Chan (2002) it is suggested that men and women are faced with different risk taking opportunities, rather than differences in inclination. In relation to certain acts stated here, it is possible that there is a difference in inclination. Both males and females in this sample had the opportunity to truant, yet only the females stated such, perhaps insinuating differences in inclination. However, for the majority of the other activities it may be the opportunity aspect that differs. Females are perhaps not given the chance (whether at school or by parents) to participate in football, due to gender stereotyping, whereas it is seen as a natural sport for males. Similar assumptions are made about BMXing and skateboarding. Such a distinction in the identity of gender specific risk taking was even noted by one female respondent.

OO   I think if it were boys it would be different cos boys are more likely to do stunts on a bike

LL   it depends

why do you think that?

OO   it's a boy thing to do

(fY11)

Males are not as likely to get into older boy's cars, as the opportunity arises primarily when females associate with older boyfriends. Females could be faced with more opportunity to engage in unprotected sex for similar reasons and due to differences in

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the rate of sexual maturity. The same can be said for underage clubbing. This opportunity is heightened for females as they mature quicker and have the ability (via make up and clothing) to make themselves look older. Males may have similar inclinations for these acts, but their opportunity is restricted.

The males and females in this sample cited very different activities in response to the term risk. Confirming previous research from the early 1990s (Alexander 1990), male risk taking tended to be jovial, playful, daring and not necessarily punishable (by law, parents, teachers etc), whereas female risk taking was focused on rebellion and disobedience with significant relationships showing a disregard for authority. The data from this research also supported this point (Chi-squared 1df = 3.52, p<0.05) showing that males were more likely to have ever ridden a motorcycle (.010) and participate in rock climbing (.000).

Table 4.4 Gender and ever having ridden a motorcycle

		Sex		
Motorcycle		*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
	Yes	78	52	63
	No	22	48	37

Table 4.5 Gender and ever participated in rock climbing

		Sex		
Rock		*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Climbing	*Yes*	78	39	56
	No	22	61	44

In addition further analysis (Chi-squared 1df = 3.52, p<0.05) showed that male risk taking was significantly related to having ever having had a serious injury (.035), which reinforces this physical, daring response. This evidence supports that presented in relation to accidents.

Table 4.6 Gender and prevalence of injury

Injury		Sex		Total
		Male	Female	
	Yes	68	40	58
	No	32	50	43

There was no significant statistical difference found in the amount of risks taken. Males and females took similar amounts of risks, although the types engaged in differed considerably by gender. This supports the inference that opportunity and willingness may be factors at work. Therefore it is concluded that males and females define their risk taking behaviour differently based on varying restrictions in opportunity, rather than different propensity to take risks.

4.24. Danger and Gender

The results from the open questions for danger could also be separated into male and female responses for an analysis of the gender differences (see Appendix B for detailed analysis).

Table 4.7 Types of Danger by Sex

	Females	% Of Female Response	Males	% Of Male Response
Stunts and Play	1	1.7	18	39.1
Health	16	26.7	3	6.5
Criminal Acts	8	13.3	3	6.5
Sports and Leisure	6	10.0	10	21.7
Transport	13	21.7	6	13.0
Association with Others	6	10.0	1	2.2
Roads	3	5.0	4	8.7
Wrong Place, Wrong Time	5	8.3	0	0.0
Disobeying Parents	1	1.7	0	0.0
Disobeying School	1	1.7	0	0.0
Job	0	0.0	1	0.0
Total	60	100	46	100

From all the data gathered, only 11.8% of the activities cited were mentioned by both male and female respondents. This indicates that the majority of responses were defined by sex. In comparing definitions of risk and danger, both males and females cited alcohol, tobacco and riding a motorcycle under both headings. These were the only activities cited for both genders and both concepts.

The most common dangerous activities cited by females were Health, Transport, and Criminal Acts. The most common dangerous activities cited by males were Stunts and Play, Sports and Leisure, and Transport. As with the risk question, there was a marked difference in the types of dangerous activities given by males and females. Again, there was no significant difference in the prevalence of dangerous acts for either gender.

Male association with danger involved play, fun and games, and interaction with the peer group. Even the Transport category mainly involved the riding of motorbikes, which can be done as a sporting venture, or as play. It is possible that male involvements in dangerous activities are often undertaken in the presence of others. They are ego building. They are used to impress others by placing the individual in a situation that is admired by peers. The intended impact is to create a spectacle, which can be laughed or marvelled at by friends. There is only the limited issue of being caught by elders, and punished, as the activities chosen were not overtly prohibited.

The female association with danger used the peer group in a different way, to instigate involvement in a deviant act (deviant from a parental/adult perspective). Here danger was associated with forbidden acts, such as smoking, drinking, drug taking, and hanging around with disreputable others. Again we see the disobedient nature of the activity, as we did with risk taking. Female involvements in dangerous activities were often

undertaken simply for the rebellion they involve. The danger did involve harm to the individual, but the preferred dangerous acts of females suggest there is more to it than that.

The responses given by males for both risky and dangerous acts were very similar. Acts which were considered risky by males were often cited as dangerous. Female responses however were likely to occur as risks but not as dangerous acts. For example, learning to drive, truanting, taking economics GCSE, and belly button piercing. This could suggest that male adolescent behaviour is always centred around fun and play, whether it is considered to be risky or dangerous. The consequences are almost always of physical harm, with no wider remit. Females on the other hand differentiate between risk and danger, with the consequences of risk not limited to physical harm or negative outcomes. Risk taking provides a more important role for them. They allow their definition to stretch beyond the masculine identity of power, strength and competition within the peer group. Their risk taking supports the development of their female identities through the possibility of gain via personal challenges and individual needs.

This discussion has provided a valuable insight into the context and prevalence of adolescent risk taking. Many interesting findings have developed here and have guided this research towards an appreciation of social acceptability and diversity of behaviour, the limitations of perceived negativity of possible outcomes, and the context of opportunity within the gender divide. What the above has also shown is that cannabis use is commonly engaged in and considered to be both a risk and a danger. The sample was more comfortable acknowledging this behaviour using the concept of danger. It follows then that using the above definitions such an activity was aligned with the possibility of physical harm. It is interesting to note that perhaps legal and social

consequences were therefore of secondary concern, possibly downplayed due to confusion or normalisation as previously stated. As the two terms are noted as interlinked the relevance to this study is again reinforced; dangerous acts always carry some level of risk.

4.3. Conclusions

After consideration of the points in this chapter a further revision of the description of risk emerging from this research is required. The evidence presented here supports the comments of Short (1984) and Adams (1995) who called for context and neutrality to be applied to the researching of risk. The young people in this study acknowledged that risk was not necessarily deviant or criminal, it was not necessarily portrayed as negative or had to be of a physical nature. Furthermore the description of risk needs to account for differences in gender as provided in section 4.2. We find two alternative descriptions that now present themselves for young people: living at risk and taking risks.

A risk is a specific event (undertaken or subjected to), where under certain conditions (e.g. time, control, number of people involved), the probability of any outcome (positive or negative) from a specific hazard/danger (e.g. electricity) is not known with certainty. Any negative outcomes are expressed in terms of harm or loss.

Furthermore

To take a risk, subject to certain conditions, is to engage in socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviour where the outcome (positive or negative) of a specific danger (physical e.g. cannabis)/hazard (not necessarily physical e.g. economics) is not known with certainty. The definition of such a risk and the opportunity for it to occur differs considerably for males and females.

Both concepts in this distinction (living at risk and taking risks) will be addressed in the following chapters. Firstly the divide will be explained in the context of the structural conditions of the Risk Society (Chapter Five). Secondly the distinction will be addressed in relation to the individual actor (Chapter Six). It is following the latter discussion (taking risks) with an acknowledgement of the preceding dialogue, which will then be investigated in detail. In each chapter the descriptions created here will be revised to take account of the presented discussions.

Summary

4.0.

- The chosen sample does not focus on an at risk sub section. Youth lifestyles rather than youth subcultures are a more appropriate starting point.

4.1.

- The sample of young people saw their risk definition and complementary behaviour guided by social acceptability

- The sample of young people perceived danger as explicitly linked to the possibility of negative physical consequences.

- The sample believed that danger always had an element of risk, whereas it was possible to find examples of risk that did not involve their concept of danger.

- Divisions in risk behaviour according to gender were not based on a difference in propensity to take risks, but on notions of definition and opportunity.

- Males showed a greater involvement in jovial behaviour, whereas females tended to provide more rebellion.

- Males tended to link risk and danger more closely based on the remit of physical harm, whereas for females risk provided a more meaningful challenge.

4.2.

- The awareness of cannabis primarily as a physical threat led the sample to align use to the concept of danger and downplay the legal and social consequences of the drug.

4.3.

- Living at risk and the desire to take risks separates alternative descriptions. Such accounts must also acknowledge context and neutrality.

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The Impact of the Risk Society

After an initial exploration of the stage for risk analysis, the scene must be set to address why young people find themselves in these risk seeking endeavors. If we know a little about what leads young people into risk taking behaviour, we can start to understand how such decisions are made. This chapter begins to unravel the social conditions in which such behaviour occurs. Psychological accounts, such as rational choice and heuristical bias, will be addressed in the Chapter Six.

There are distinct sections to this discussion. The main contributors to the sociology of risk, namely Beck, Giddens and Douglas, will be identified first. Consequently the impact of recent social change on the nature of adolescence will then be addressed. It is theorised that this impact can be dichotomised into distinct concerns using the terminology of the Risk Society; 'at risk youth' (grounded in insecurity) and 'young risk takers' (grounded in uncertainty). This distinction is provided at a base level in the previous chapter (section.4.3). With specific attention paid to the latter concern the discussion turns to young people as 'risk activists' – a concept which reflects the ability to actively use risk for the development of self identity. A more detailed account of the link between the Risk Society, specific activities, namely drug use, and issues of control lead to a conclusion involving 'coping strategies' in support of the risk activist theory. Finally before providing a critique of the aforementioned points, the discussion will be brought full circle and related directly to the paradigm of postmodernism. To begin with the reaction to social forces, rather than to specify those peculiar to one social group, has met with disapproval as it underestimates the properties of youth themselves (Miles 2000). This thesis is confident in its appreciation of both structure and agency

accounts of the management of risk, and attention will be paid to both in the forthcoming discussion.

5.0. The Sociology of Risk

The nature of this current era has been theoretically critiqued for the last 15 years. There are many perspectives which could be presented, and range of umbrella descriptors to choose from. If we refer to this era as postmodernism using the definitions of Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1988), we expect discourse surrounding the rejection of grand narratives, the appreciation of diversity and the dismissal of static explanatory variables (in Furlong & Cartmel 1997). It is accepted that such an approach is beneficial to the study of young people and drug use. Postmodernists may value drug use as a viable tool of expression, not constrained by the parameters of predictor variables such as age, gender or social status, and supported by the normalisation thesis. However in relation to the *implications* of the current era, rather than *explanations* of relevant behaviour, the standpoint of academics such as Giddens (1990, 1991) and Beck (1992) bear more appropriate reference to the reflexivity of the current era. Therefore in relation to structural conditions the latter will be the preferred reference. In discussions surrounding drug use as a specific risky act, postmodernist theory will also be applied in acceptance that theoretical debate and the social world has progressed somewhat since the early 1990s. In addition the work of Mary Douglas (1982) adds a cultural dimension to this discussion.

Beck provides a depressingly cynical description of industrial society, engulfed in the need to protect themselves from the destructive nature of modern science and technology (Adams 1995: 179). The peculiarity he draws is between the rationality of modernity and the risks and dangers of the late modern world.

> He seeks to draw a firm analytical distinction between an industrial society which was hitherto blind to the uninsurable risks of modernisation, and an emergent 'risk society' which is being forced to negotiate with a future which imposes the treat of self-annihilation upon our lives.

(Wilkinson 1997: 3)

Beck's ontological school of thought emphasises the preoccupation of modern society with the prediction of future risks and possible adverse consequences (Kempshall 1999: 38). This preoccupation has arisen through society's constant exposure to hazards, creating what Beck calls 'uncertainty'. The consequences of such generate increased anxiety, scepticism of expert opinion, and diminished trust in both professionals and established institutions (Beck 1992).

This era redeems certain characteristics, although the line between industrial society and the emergence of high/late modernity/reflexive modernisation/risk society[1] is not clear. Beck talks of a change dating back to the 1960s and 1970s for most of Western society, with the overall shift from pre-modern times occurring over the last 400 years. So what characteristics became prominent? For individuals certain questions evolved: is the world riskier than before? Should we take more care of ourselves? Should we believe what the 'experts' tell us? Are we being watched more? (Boyne 2003:98). For social groups, locally, nationally and internationally, changes in education, welfare, warfare,

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[1] For simplicity and relevance to the continued theme of risk the latter will be refer to from here onwards.

environment, employment, gender relations, geography, health, politics and consumerism were and continue to be pivotal during this time. It is acknowledged that the threats of industrialisation still exist, but have now taken on new qualities: bigger, badder, uninsurable and unknown. In the Risk Society the preoccupation with wealth has been superseded by the preoccupation with harm.

The nature of such harm, or 'risk', was further dichotomised by Beck: those which had a physical presence and could destroy life, and those which culminated in social and cultural insecurities (*ibid.*). The result? A situation for which Beck coined the term 'excessive individualism'; the practicalities of cognitive decision making embroiled with risk, myth and panic. Beck describes this individualism as produced and enforced by basic institutions, made abstract by their lack of local context where decision making was commonly shared in open discussion. Furlong & Cartmel (1997: 7) believe this process propels risk into the subjective sphere. Actual risks remain relatively stable; however it is appraised risks, now unique to the individual, which become the most prominent issue. As individuals struggle to survive and deal with insecurity they turn inwards and analyse the diversity of choice alone. Rather than confronting insecurity with group action (e.g. via class – Trade Unions, or gender – feminism) or supported by traditional structures (e.g. nuclear families or class) that typified action in modernity, the responsibility for managing risk is now increasingly laid at the feet of the individual actor (Furlong & Cartmel 1997). Collective action is relegated in favour of simple collective justification. Davis (1999:297) notes that as a means of coping with the 'contradictions of social life' injustices are neutralised on a grand scale, synonymous with the techniques identified by David Matza (1964, 1990).

However such a substantial social change, even in its preliminary stages, was not accepted by all.

> How extraordinary! The richest, longest-lived, best protected, most resourceful civilisation, with the highest degree of insight into its own technology is on its way to becoming the most frightened.

(Wildavsky 1979 in Slovic 1982: 83)

> The claims of harm from technology, I believe, are false, mostly false, or unproven.

(Wildavsky 1991 in Adams 1995: 183)

Furthermore the tone of this work is also criticised as contradictory. Adams (1995: 193) observes that like Douglas (section 5.03) Beck 'spectacularly miss the point of all their preceding argument and analysis ... [insofar as they] appear to crave a certainty that the physical sciences and their own theories tell them they can never have'. If the actual nature of current risks is to be debated, the amplification of appraised risk, i.e. of fear and anxiety and possible likelihood, even from exaggerated risks must not be overlooked. It is this distinction which is addressed by Anthony Giddens.

5.02 Anthony Giddens

Whereas the manner of Beck's work is somewhat pessimistic, Giddens explores the 'double edged character of society' (1990: 7) in which a world enriched with opportunities can also harbour danger and insecurity. Individuals are

> Caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seem in part outside of our control.

(*ibid.*: 2)

The baseline for analysis has to be the *inevitability* of living with dangers which are remote from the control not only of individuals, but also of large organisations ... these are not the risks anyone *chooses* to run.

(*ibid.*: 131)

Although relinquishing the notion of control, Giddens notes that individuals accept that 'unanticipated results may be a consequences of our activities or decisions'[2] (*ibid.*: 30) rather than, for example those founded in religious acts. However, although we foresee uncertainty, in the current era the ability to anticipate possible outcomes has become spurious, hence we are now living in conditions associated with the term risk. Such countless possibilities, resulting from such a situation, in turn generate doubt and anxiety.

Giddens segregates the risk environment initially into three before developing a more substantial description of actual and appraised risk. Risk entails those threats which derive from the reflexivity of modernity itself, those specific to human violence, and those which apply specifically to the notion of the self. His Risk Profiles includes the intensity and expansion of globalisation coupled with the created and institutionalised risk environment. In addition the notion of perception and awareness is raised in relation to the inadequacies of religion or magic, the breadth of the available knowledge bank and finally the limitations of expertise.

According to Giddens, modern societies have learnt to trust 'abstract systems', the reliance on expert knowledge and their symbolic properties, which maintain our everyday lives (1990: 83). Individuals have little control over food supplies or health care systems, therefore they are taken for granted. This 'disembedding mechanism'

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[2] Giddens analogy of the 'careering juggernaut' is most relevant here.

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removes expectations and guarantees from localised systems and alleviates the 'immediacies of context' (*ibid.*: 28). In turn this increases societies concerns about *possible* risks, where 'ignorance always provides grounds for scepticism' (Giddens 1990: 89). Luhmann agrees; using risk as a necessary tool for 'observing society' (1993: iii) she claims that as the modern world breeds more scientists and experts, the more lay people become concerned about risk. Whereas Beck points out the mistrust of society in expert opinions, Giddens advocates that trust in experts is integral to our way of life, although it is often unfounded. Risk taking therefore, according to Giddens, is linked to the notion of edgework (Lyng 1990) and is used to wean us away from our security blankets (Boyne 2003: 74). Marris (1996) extends this dialogue specifically in relation to the notion of 'uncertainty'. Thinking back to notions of calculation and probability, Marris suggests that however small or large, the notion of uncertainty is always uncomfortable. He highlights the importance of knowledge, and the constant search for information, not just in the public sphere (health warnings etc), but within our own private emotions.

In his later work (1991) Giddens expands the polarisation of late modernity by stressing the connection between its globalising properties and the impact on individuals. This relationship, and development of both spheres happens not via reactive development but by proactive exchanges: the self develops through relations with global society and *vice versa*.

> In the settings of what I call 'high' or 'late' modernity – our present day world – the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet this task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities.

> (Giddens 1991: 3)

In this context Giddens disagrees with Luhmann's belief that to do nothing is to lose nothing. He states that 'inaction can be risky' especially in modern society and cites inaction in the face of threatened nuclear war as an example (1991: 32).

5.03 Mary Douglas

If then, the conditions of society are now known, we ask how different individuals or social groups deal with these challenges. Mary Douglas, along with Ulrich Beck, has been most influential in creating social theories of risk (Wilkinson 2001: 1). Douglas adheres to a Durkheimian, structural-functionalist, illumination of risk perception (*ibid.*), 'which proposes that what we conceive as 'reality' is determined by our prior commitments towards different types of social solidarity' (Sjoberg 1997:114). Under new cultural conditions:

> Risk provides the natural vocabulary for the conception of social change

<div align="right">(Miles 2000: 55)</div>

From anthropological extraction, cultural theory has developed a distinctive model of behavioural patterns, founded on operational, belief-value structures. This shared belief model includes: hierarchy, egalitarian, individualist and fatalist (included in British not US scales) ideologies (for a comprehensive explanation see Douglas 1992, Douglas & Wildavsky 1982), which provide a culturally biased account for why people choose which risks to fear (as a process of social functions) and why (who we blame).

Once the idea is accepted that people select their awareness of certain dangers to conform with a specific way of life, it follows that people who adhere to different forms of social organisation are disposed to take (and avoid) different kinds of risk.

(Douglas & Wildavsky 1982 in Marris 1996: 16)

Douglas and her colleagues use the egalitarian model to account for why the 'Risk Society' is pre-empting an 'environmental apocalypse' due to a fear of how and why institutions and establishments make decisions about possible disasters. (Wilkinson 2001: 6). Whereas Beck foresaw an era developing to cope with a new cultural situation, Douglas sees hazard perception as a historical tool for the preservation of group solidarity (Wilkinson 2001: 5). As the current era dismantles local connections individuals may feel liberated by choice and innovation. However as Douglas explains, difficulties arise as the support networks are also removed. The risk dialogue provides society with the mechanisms to look forward to communal protection, however in essence, such a collective persona is entrenched with self interest (Miles 2000).

To provide an example in keeping with cultural theory, Furedi noted that disasters have occurred throughout the ages, but the reaction to them has been determined by the disposition of society at that time. Taking examples from the American media shows that in the 1960s nuclear power was welcomed and the benefits highlighted, whereas in the 1980s the opposite was apparent.

The selective way in which the media and other institutions pick and choose what constitutes a risk underlines the social dynamic behind the formulation of risk consciousness.

(Furedi 1998: 6)

Like Beck, Douglas made little attempt to authenticate her theories. However, cultural theory has been empirically tested (see Sjoberg 1997, Slovic *et al.* 1992, Drake &

Wildavsky 1990), predominantly psychometrically via attitude scales and group/grid dimensions for each cultural bias. Some findings have been influenced by methodological bias and have proved on the whole inconclusive, showing clearly that the variance of risk perception needs to be explained comprehensively in other ways (Sjoberg 1997). However many writers do claim to have found a statistically significant relationship between cultural biases and social perceptions of risk (Wilkinson 2001: 10). Lupton *et al.*'s (1995 in Natalier 2001: 67) study of HIV testing, and motivations for the test showed that 'people's decisions are shaped by their culturally referenced assumptions about risk rather than any objective interpretation of statistical or medical probabilities of infection' (also see Boyne 2003). These studies suggest that people's acceptance of expert knowledge is vitiated by their cultural conjecture and pre-existing opinions. Adams (1995: 64 from Wilkinson 2001) challenges these correlations and claims that the authors locate respondents who fit into their set categories and then use the same categories to account for their beliefs.

5.1. The Changing Nature of Adolescence

In England and Wales a person is deemed capable of acknowledging the difference between right and wrong from the age of 10, although the legal definition of a child is someone under the age of 14 (Croall 1998: 118). Those between 14 and 18 are commonly known as 'young persons' or 'adolescents' and from 18 to 20 'young adults' (*ibid.*). In the 21st century, young people are heavily protected and cared for, often viewed as 'innocents' and to a certain extent vulnerable enough to be considered as not responsible for their own actions (*ibid.*).

From the mid-nineteenth century, with the introduction of an improved education system, children were less frequently found in the adult world of work. They were educated and conditioned in schools, and the classroom became the main form of socialisation. A phase of 'youth' was introduced, whereby children were placed on the road to adulthood via knowledge and the acquisition of maturity. Through the necessity of discipline and conflicts with those who administered it, adolescence, as a disturbed life process, was born.

> Young people develop their spontaneity and individuality in a social context that is insecure, unstable and hardly accountable. The social position 'being adolescent' is always temporary and never concrete or permanently secure.

(Chisholm &Hurrelmann 1995: 151)

> Over the past two decades there has been a renewed interest in the study of adolescence. One important impetus for greater attention to adolescence comes from the recognition that adolescence is a relatively high-risk stage of life.

(Jessor 1984 in Benthin et al. 1993: 153)

In the last 50 years, the decline of the family ritual, roles and curfews (Felson & Gottfredson 1984 in Warr 2002: 18) have been aggravated by technology, the freedom of the car and the desire via consumersim to work for money. Coupled with the reliance on the peer group (Chapter Six) adolescent risk behaviour has become more prominant. There are those however that recount evidence to suggest that such a troublesome time is not specific to this period of history. Dating back to the 1500s , Head (1997) states that in 1517, 300 arrests were made after London apprentices rioted, and again in 1590 London newspapers were commenting on the disreputable behaviour of gangs of youths. Late 18th and early 19th century literature also spoke of adolescent suffering and 'suicidal despair in facing the adult world' (ibid.: 2). Many other similarities, noted throughout history are added to this discussion to suggest that such a troublesome

transitional period is not specific to the current era. However the author (*ibid*) raises a note of caution. To what extent has the nature of adolescence remained static when one considers actual disparities in the collection of evidence? Furthermore consider the appraised reflexivity of the image and portrayal of youth coupled with a documented change in social, economic and industrial conditions. It is further to this last point that this research accepts the variance and exception of postmodern youth.

5.2. The Impact of the Risk Society

If we accept then that modern urbanisation has produced a widening gap between the domains of children and adults, and the conditions of the Risk Society, we must investigate whether adolescents have been specifically affected. Davis (1999), explicitly making this link for American society, talks of a 'youth crisis'.[3] Her structural reasoning relies on the dichotomous impetus of a high risk environment and a negative justice system. Her high risk environment, created by the shift from modernity to postmodernity is characterised by doubt and lack of meaning, and the intensity of self reflection leading to the conclusion that young people are the 'most affected and the least prepared'. In response to the youths' ability to adjust and manage, the rest of society, according to Miles (2000) struggles with clarity of definition and is resistant to new forms of knowledge. Such conduct by the rest of society in turn marginalizes the said behaviour of youths and propels it into the sphere of the criminal justice system.

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[3] As Head (1997: 11) notes, the use of the word crisis can be problematic. In psychoanalysis the word is used to describe an event 'which has to be resolved before progressing further'. or can be applied to 'an abrupt or traumatic event'. To quash the idea that adolescents experience high levels of 'trauma' Erickson (1950 in *ibid.*) softened his stages of 'identity crises' to a 'normative crisis'. It is believed that the use of the term by Davis is to highlight this sense of trauma and 'life-threatening development-at-any-cost' mentality (1999: 29). In this sense she is attempting to highlight, perhaps too decoratively some may argue, the essence of postmodern social life.

Based on a review of the literature, this thesis also suggests that the link between youth and risk can be broken down into two distinct areas using the terminology of the Risk Society: *at risk youth (insecurity) and young risk takers (uncertainty)*. The reader is directed to the descriptions provided in the previous chapter for further clarity of distinction (section 4.3). The focus of this study is the latter although comment shall be passed on the preceding point.

5.21. At Risk Youth: Insecurity

Concurrent with the instability felt by the pressures of the Risk Society, young people also find themselves as targets of risk. There has been much research invested into the identification of risk factors (see Communities that Care, Crow *et al.* 2005) of offending or delinquent behaviour (e.g. illegitimate activity or behavioural problems at school) and even of health risks. In addition it must be noted that young people find themselves at subsequent risk of victimisation, at levels to rival that of older age groups (Loader 1996:28). Given the small proportion of police time devoted to issues of youth victimisation (*ibid.*), the anxiety over potential risks felt by adolescents in this era is of great concern. The above, coupled with Beck's sentiments of the decline of collective responsibility, highlights the stress of dealing with insecurity at an individual level, perpetuated by the adolescents' immaturity in the decision making process. The description of youth as 'cynical, and apolitical, self-centred and withdrawn' (Howe & Strauss 1993 in Davis 1999: 7) begins to be deconstructed. In addition the pressures of consumerism places young people at risk from the media, as Best & Kellner (1998) suggest the 'dumbing down' and infinite 'hyper-reality' once discussed by Baudrillard also distorts and therefore denies a real sense of future (in Miles 2000: 53).

Furthermore the youth of today are dealing with more risks[4] in most spheres than their parents.

> - the world of which I call high modernity – is apocalyptic, not because it is inevitably heading towards calamity, but because it introduces risks which previous generations have not had to face

(Giddens 1991: 4)

Moreover as noted (Davis 1999: 21) such risks are not confined to the stereotypical high risk groups (e.g. defined by class, ethnicity etc) of the modern era. To draw on postmodern terminology further, we can illustrate this change via the *normalisation of risk*.

The link between youth and the Risk Society now becomes evident. The association between (in)security and threats to identity is introduced here.[5] Such examples as increased dependency (on the family, school and state; see above), resulting in economic and social marginality, cause confusion for adolescent identities (Furlong & Cartmel 1997) which are bound up in social context (Miles 2000). Coupled with this are biological and physiological changes which 'seriously affect these aspects of identity, and represent a considerable challenge in adaptation for even the most well adjusted young person' (Coleman & Hendry 1990: 21). During this transitional period and subsequent 'identity moratorium' (Cote & Allahar in *ibid*: 44) young people are susceptible to media and consumer influences[6] and pressures from youth culture to define their own sense of self. Rapoport & Rapoport (1975 cited in Furlong & Cartmel 1997: 56) support this claim by concluding that 'exploration and the quest for personal

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[4] For those that question whether there is such an concept as 'actual risk' (measurable and objective), then as Giddens suggests simply a greater culture of fear might suffice (Miles 2000). Also see Furedi (1998).
[5] Loader (1996) often uses the terms identity and security (threats to) synonymously.
[6] See link to Jackass and male consumer identity mentioned in Chapter 4, section 4.23

identity' occurs between the ages of 15 and 19. This then develops between the years of 16 and 26 into the 'establishment of social identity and the formation of relationships'.

5.22. Risk Taking Youth: Uncertainty

Whereas insecurity described a condition of feeling threatened by an external force, uncertainty is internal anxiety felt regarding individual behaviour. Moreover in further reference to the second point raised, it can be suggested that young people turn this negative experience of risk (insecurity) on its head. Denscombe (2001a: 159) notes that the era of uncertainty breeds 'scepticism and irreverence' and for the young person 'self identity itself becomes a matter of uncertainty'. Following the rest of society, who question authority's opinion, young people have learnt to question conformity and 'experiment with their identities, no matter what boundaries (...) of identity, may appear to constrain them' (2001a: 160).

> Risk-taking was, in a sense, justified by an appeal to a vision of the world in which they lived as one that was inherently uncertain and risky

(Denscombe 2001a: 169)

We acknowledge here the ability of young people to positively deal with living 'at risk' by embracing and challenging it. *Young people become activists of the Risk Society.*

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5.3. Risk Activists and the Development of the Self

The product of this constructive action is as follows.

5.31. The Active Management of Uncertainty

Humans, according to Marris (1996), are self-regulating, actively searching for understandings of our purposes and our actions. We seek an equilibrium, not simply in terms of social stability, but in terms of the 'self'.

> The management of uncertainty ... rests fundamentally on developing a secure self, capable of trust and sustaining its integrity in the face of frustration.

(ibid.: 27)

This management of uncertainty is individualistic and based primarily on our own experiences. Through action and interaction of intention and experience we construct an awareness of ourselves and how we are interpreted. Our experiences are our existence. The meanings we derive from these experiences are our 'self'. Such an interactionist perspective supports the hypothesis of active self generation (Gergen & Davis 1985 in Coleman & Hendrey 1990: 68). To use the terminology of Giddens, we relate the Risk Society and the self as one which threatens to disrupt the 'ontological security' of the other (disruption of our emotive sense of being and self identity, confidence in ourselves and the consistency, reliability, security and trust in the other be it either person or thing). Therefore our desires, choices and purposes (why we choose what we choose) refer directly to the expression of the self.

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We are, not what we are, but what we make ourselves (...) The reflexivity of the self is continuous. as well as all-pervasive.

(Giddens 1991: 75)

On observing the above, we acknowledge that this uncertainty occurs at a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, during which the young person makes decisions on what activities to participate in; some of which propose sizeable risks.

The crucial point is not just that the late modern era is characterised by doubt and uncertainty but that this may be 'existentially troubling' for ordinary individuals...If Giddens is correct, it is something which young people will be aware of and, more than that, it is something they will perceive as 'troublesome'.

(Denscombe 2001a: 161)

5.32. The Acknowledgement of Positive Experiences

If we follows Gidden's suggestion of the double-edged character of society we acknowledge that insecurity and uncertainty may also be perceived in a positive light. The unknown is scary but it produces more opportunities, more adventure and a greater prospect for self control. One of the ways in which this control may be obtained is by purposefully engaging in risky activities. The sensation gained from this control is two fold; the ability to cope with the unknown and the arousal felt from participation itself.

Furedi (1998), in a backlash against societies obsession with safety, expresses his anguish at societies attempt to 'ban risks' and undermine the positive feelings associated with risk taking.

Today's sad attempt to ban risks has the effect of undermining the spirit of exploration and experimentation. There is indeed a major health threat facing our society. Even more than passive smoking – passive living can damage your health.

(Furedi 1998: viii)

5.33. Types of Sensation

To turn specifically to some of the activities used by young people in this current era highlights the relationship between the positive feelings gained from such situations and the conditions of the Risk Society. The inclusion of specific examples of activity also enables references to be made to such in the empirical work. Inferred reference to the pressures of the Risk Society can be taken from those that claim that the young of today are more likely to experiment with drugs than a decade ago (Measham *et al.* 1994 in Furlong & Cartmel 1997: 74). Plant & Plant suggest that drug or alcohol use is 'simply a way in which young people react to the structural conditions which operate around them' (1992, in Miles 2000: 60). Furthermore using the role of the other Coleman & Hendrey (1990) note that social unification via group practice can establish collective identity in addition to aiding personal stresses and the desire for fun and curiosity

Denscombe (2001a) follows a similar line, although drawing specifically on the work of Giddens. He perceives late modernity as a troublesome time where young people use the act of smoking to contribute to 'self image, self-empowerment and self affirmation'. The link with drug use is acknowledged as one of many 'lifestyle choices' which harbours 'openness' from the 'diversity of options (Giddens 1991: 5).

Reflexively organised life planning, which normally presumes consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity.

(ibid.)

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Bingham & Shope (2004) citing the work of Arnett (2000) also support the conclusion that 'this period of high mortality risk is associated with identity development' in relation to driving behaviours.

Hammersley *et al.* (2001) talk explicitly about the impact cannabis use can have on social identity via the processes of psychological and social theory. Again, rather than the risk taking itself, it is the management or control of risk within a social grouping which these authors cite as most relevant to the affirmation of identity. What this management does do is signal the parameters and boundaries of group membership and social setting via similarity and difference.

Most recently Cameron Duff (2004), a leading Australian academic in the field of substance use has used the concept of the Risk Society to analyse the impact of substance use on the self. He draws on the work of Foucault (1988) and his concept of 'self fashioning', the use of pleasure as a means of regulating the boundaries of self control. He related this concept directly to young people and drug use.

5.34. The Need for Control

The reoccurring theme throughout the above discussion is the aspect of control, either within a social group (Dencsombe 2001, Hammersley *et al.* 2001) or by individuals (Duff, 2004). The issue of drug taking as a method of testing self control can be reinterpreted to focus on the act of control itself rather than the outcome (management rather than moderation or self restraint). 'Consumer lifestyles', notes Miles (2000: 46), of which drug consumption is one example, 'do give them that control, even if it is merely illusionary'. What is not known for certainty is whether the young people

engaging in such acts or the wider social group perceive such experiences as being rooted in the notion of control. This research attempts to find out (Chapter Seven).

What the research of this thesis theorises, is that the control of certain risk behaviours by young people, including drug use, may be undertaken as 'coping strategies' into an otherwise uncertain and 'troublesome' world (see Miles 2000). Adolescents, as other marginalized social groups (e.g. travellers, Wild 2005), perhaps feel the impact of uncertainty from the Risk Society more than most. The need to take risks that they can control, rather than being eternally susceptible to risks beyond their control may be a method of 'coping' with this turbulent time. Silbereisn *et al.* (1987 in Coleman & Hendrey 1990: 70) proposed that many so-called problem behaviours 'are in fact purposive, self-regulating, and aimed at coping with aspects of adolescent development'. Such description have been aligned with drug use (Hammersley *et al.* 2003)

> Lifestyles can be described as functional responses to modernity. Lifestyles then, are an active expression of not only the relationship between the individual and society and structure and agency, but also people's relationships to social change.
>
> (Chaney 1996 in Miles 2000: 16)

If, as Giddens suggests, we challenge the theories of irrational risk taking which are based on capitalist indoctrination and individual insensitivity (1991: 125), we – by implication - adhere to the above. Uncertainty becomes more manageable for adolescents if they feel they can achieve some sense of control, the by-product of which is the development of the self.

5.4. Risk, Drugs and Postmodernism

To bring this discussion full circle is to specifically link drug use to the conditions of the Risk Society. Beck himself commented that risk management was not necessarily problematic. The risks taken by young people may be challenging and exciting and provide a pocket of entertainment in an otherwise fatalistic society. The outcome of such a process is furthermore functional for the development of the self. The ramifications of such a conclusion needs to be acknowledged by wider society and the drugs policy debate (as suggested by Hammersley *et al.* 2001). What late modernity and the conflicts of expertise do add to the drugs question is the appreciation of knowledge as reflexive and ephemeral. As Giddens suggests 'on the level of everyday practice as well as philosophical interpretation, nothing can be taken for granted. What is acceptable/appropriate/recommended behaviour today may be seen differently tomorrow in light of altered circumstances or incoming knowledge claims' (1991: 134). In light of this, many researchers in the drugs field, it's young participants and other marginalised groups can continue to strive for shifts in policy and practice. For example with regard to policy, many reformers argue for the drug legalisation plan, based on a 'political reality' where 'the unthinkable today may well be the norm tomorrow' (Treback 1994 in Davis 1999: 189). The following table is a concise example of such shifts.

Modernism	Postmodernism
Moral standards	No unitary knowledge
Status and role of the young	Fluid sense of self
Intoxication is for adults only	Young and adult use alike
Control	No control
Denial	No denial
Protection	No 'war'
Inadequate judgement	Formulation of identity
Destructive	Pleasure seeking
Affects rationality	Escapism
All drug use, including recreational use is bad	No social fragmentation
No acceptance of experimentation	Social experimentation
Exclusion	Freedom
Rejection	Peer bonding
Punishment	Satisfaction
Deterrence	Constant demand

Taken from Davis (1999: 156)

Another example for the revision of traditional theory allows for aspects of anomie and strain to be reinterpreted from the above explanations. As Davis (1999) suggests the 'levels of stress and aggravation' coupled with 'little direction or values' for young people highlights the relevance of this concept to the current era of uncertainty and insecurity. Whereas the aspects of anomie, described by Merton, and most associated with drug use were those embroiled in 'retreatism', our new 'risk activists' may now have more in common with those described as 'innovators'; - not specifically for their criminal conduct but for their use of alternative means. In a postmodern society the situation of normlessness may not be as deeply affected by wealth but by identity.

The discussion of postmodern drug use can be given context using the example of rave culture, which rose in the 1980s and early 1990s. Some equate the use of stimulant drugs and the 'live for the now' attitude to the contradictions of the Conservative government (the illusion of increased opportunities coupled with inequality of opportunity) (Miles 2000).

> The role of Ecstasy is as an antidote to a prevailing atmosphere of risk and anxiety ... far from threatening the lives of those young people who take it, Ecstasy releases those who consume it from the perceived threat of victimisation.

(Calcutt 1995 in Miles 2000: 96)

Attempting to quash the image of 'raving hedonists' some writers have grounded drug cultures in a desire to escape from everyday life. The use of cannabis, although not as closely associated with a scene or subculture, may be consumed for similar reasons

This chapter has presented the case in defence of adolescent risk taking without overtly promoting excuses as mitigation. It is acknowledged that young people take drugs for a variety of reasons, many of which are not accounted for in this discussion and derive from traumatic and eventful childhoods. This thesis does not attempt to incorporate such accounts, only as stated as additional concerns over and above those posed by the Risk Society. The focus on non-problematic use justifies this decision. It is hoped that such an argument will help academics, teachers and policy makers understand the changing condition of adolescence with less negativity. Such suggestions for future direction will be presented here, after a critical account of some of the previously mentioned claims.

5.5. Critique

Furlong & Cartmel (1997) are critical of some of the overarching suppositions of postmodernists and Risk Society theorists. Initially they find flaws in the unique claims of modern social change and refer to the work of Durkheim in support. They suggest that variables such as class and gender should not be discarded as indicators of susceptibility, and support Beck's suggestion that the inequality of risk is still dependent on social factors such as class. While they agree that collectivism has weakened and individualism is now dominant, they argue that both Beck and Giddens exaggerate these claims, and negate structural interpretations.

The political construction of risk must also be acknowledged. Lupton also (1999: 17) protests that caution is necessary when evaluating the theories of writers such as Beck and Douglas. She notes that such theorists are politically biased to a perspective which is blind to objective facts.

> A sociological perspective on the risk debate needs to be sensitive towards the extent to which the 'objective' characteristics of risk are constructed as forms of 'political rationality', which aim to portray public protests against the trustworthiness of technological experts as either irrational or ill-informed'

> (Freudenberg & Pastor 1992 in Wilkinson 2001: 8)

Such an account adheres to Foucault's constructivism: that risks are calculated by those in power, and that individuals are categorised as high or low risk and are managed and surveyed accordingly to allow coercive discipline.

In addition it has been suggested that the emphasis on the technological and scientific hazards of the Risk Society only encapsulates a fraction of the spectrum of risk. It is

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noted that people are predominantly concerned with manufactured risks and unnatural hazards, such as nuclear waste. However 'voluntary' risks, (a discussion of which follows in Chapter Six section 6.1) are more widely accepted (Furedi 1998: 27). This research acknowledges this point and uses the Risk Society as a backdrop rather than a literal application of specific risks.

It is also important to note the limitations of applying the constraints of the Risk Society to young people. As Furlong & Cartmel (1997) state, to focus on the work of Beck and Giddens is to exaggerate the importance of individualism. This is also relevant to the identification of young people in this study as a marginalised age *group*[7]. This research acknowledges both perspectives. It is the structural forces of current society which propel young people into the management of risk. Yet it is predominantly individual action which negotiates it. The variable 'youth' is used as a predictor, thus acknowledging structural forces. In this respect, many of the claims of traditional postmodernists are overlooked, and the Risk Society correctly applied. Many contemporary debates are enlightening in their appreciation of structure and agency. The risk model accepts both the structural constraints and individual freedoms of a late modern society; the ability to be reflexive individuals working within structural conditions (Miles 2000).

In addition the study of young people demands that attention be drawn to the use of collective group action and thus to the importance of the peer group. With the emphasis on individual responsibility for risk management, there is the danger that peer relationships could be overlooked. To challenge this limitation, the influence of the

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[7] The term group is applied here to denote the similarities of experiences in comparison with others (e.g. adults). This is not to suggest that these experiences are not diverse throughout youth, they simply differ to the alternate age bracket.

peer group (and additional significant others) will be addressed in the methodology of this research.

The conclusion that to live at risk is still based on social structure and not dominated by individualism is further challenged when analysing specific types of risk. The broader concept of 'lifestyle' is defended by Miles (2000) as not determined by such factors, whereas he cites inequalities in education and employment as unequal in terms of risk. Furlong & Cartmel (1997) suggest that objective risks and life chances are still structured, at the least on gender and class. Education, schooling, the workplace and the susceptibility to mental health issues and criminal behaviour were all cited by the above authors as structurally unequal. In defence of the topic of this discussion and the application of individualism, Furlong & Cartmel (1997) do not provide adequate conclusions for the inclusion of health related behaviours to their debate.

Some points can also be raised in relation to the possible limitations of using the pessimism of authors such as Beck to study young people. As Miles (2000) suggests youth can be misunderstood simply by focusing too heavily on the melodrama of 'problematic' conditions. Not all young people are subjected to a multitude of risks and it is these mainstream youth that are often neglected in current research. This work does not dwell on the negativities of the Risk Society, nor does it assume that all young people are destined to become problematic risk takers. The impetus throughout this chapter has been on the 'risk activist' rather than implying passivity to risk. This is also a recurring theme throughout Miles' text described as the inability of many sociologists to overlook 'how such lifestyles actively engage with the structural constraints that young people must content with from day to day' (1997: 10). Furthermore the following chapter expands on this activity and seeks to address the notion of

functionalism. In addition, as discussed in Chapter Four rather than selecting a sample of known risk takers (offenders, drug users etc) this research uses a sample of the general adolescent population so that the intricacies and diversity of youth are not underestimated.

Some criticism of the impact on the self must also be acknowledged. To assume that for all young people, the concept of personal identity can be formulated via risk taking, or that drug use is the main component of a lifestyle (Miles 2000), is to fall into the trap of grand theories ousted by postmodernist thought[8]. The unique formulation of the self must be acknowledged and the desire to produce generalisable accounts quashed. To further psychological debate, there are those who deny that the self exists at all and see existence as no more than 'the notion of a centre of gravity' (Head 1997: 20). The cited author notes a return to *cogito ergo sum* for an in depth discussion of the latter point. Furthermore, once a sense of self is acquired, is it static? To discuss identity and self affirmation in the context of coping strategies in a rapidly changing society is to acknowledge its evolving properties.

There are also those who suggest that drug use does not provide a purposeful mechanism for coping with the strains of the Risk Society. For example Melucci (1992 in Miles 2000: 155) suggests that heroin use provides only a 'fake challenge' which does not hint of any possible benefit. The choice of cannabis as a focus of attention in this thesis is perhaps of some credit and it may be that lower risk illegal drugs hold more functional properties. Possibly the lower the legal, social and physical risk, the less likely the substance is to distance users from their reasons for action. For pure escapism heroin could be the drug of choice. However, as the above discussion has

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[8] The philosophical approach to this thesis, rather than the approaches of Beck or Giddens.

touched on the notion of control, and the purpose of being in control, to engage in substance use that negates this element of control more than most, in at least its methods of use, is to be considered contradictory to this argument. Here lies the distinction between types of use and levels of usage which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

5.6. Suggestions

It is apparent that the Risk Society can, as Giddens anticipated, be both exciting and troublesome for young and old alike. Therefore suggestions need to be made as to how to approach the effects of embracing such a dualism. A full discussion in relation to decision making will be provided in Chapter Seven, however some comment will be introduced here. Davis (1999) believes answers should be focused on collective, inclusionary practice which avoids 'power over' or clinical, administrative solutions. Following Durkheimian principles, she argues for community collectivity, restorative justice and holistic education to counter individualism and the products of individual responsibility which are superimposed by the Risk Society. This is perhaps the method best assumed to stop Giddens' juggernaut, or at least give it direction. There is evidence from the criminal justice system that such principles are being embraced and that many theoretical challenges are now in support of such notions. Further efforts should be made to specifically address the management of recreational drug use by young people.

The alternative to a response governed by the doctrine of collective responsibility is to continue with the principles of individualism. Individuals will continue to tackle their own risks alone, and take responsibility for bad decision making. Such a direction,

although not disregarding the occurrence of determinism, hints a little too strongly of Classical ideology, and the responsibility of the rational actor. Furthermore, the 'risk model of intervention' does not lend itself well to a postmodern approach. Methods of risk assessment, or identification of specific risk factors are not inclusionary means of dealing with risk behaviour. As Davis notes (1999: 168) 'the risk model often fails to take into account the *normality* of alcohol and drug use among youth`. In addition it can lead to negative labeling and stereotyping[9].

The ideal way of addressing risk management, of drugs and other such behaviours, would acknowledge the structural reasoning behind use, whilst encouraging the development of personal methods to reduce the occurrence of negative experiences physical or otherwise) to others. 'There is simultaneously the need to allow time for exploration and indecision` 'to avoid false maturity of foreclosure` (Head 1997: 23). This ultimately occurs at the decision making stage for all individuals, and it is here that this research will focus its attention.

5.7. Aligned Descriptions

Based on this discussion, the initial descriptions of risk provided in the Chapter Two (section 2.05) needs to be refined in order to incorporate these comments. Where to live at risk (insecurity) was simply *'a specific event where under certain conditions the probability of any outcome from a specific hazard/danger is not known with certainty'* the nature of those `certain conditions` can now be fully prescribed. Furthermore the description of active risk involvement (uncertainty) also needs revision.

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[9] Many of the issues raised here are examined in Chapter Six.

*To take a risk, **subject to the conditions of the Risk Society**, is to engage in socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviour where the outcome (positive or negative) of a specific danger/hazard (not necessarily physical) is not known with certainty.*

Summary

5.0.

- The Risk Society may provide the ideal framework for analysing adolescent risk taking behaviour. Postmodernist theory also provides a base for the discussion of drug use

5.1.

- It is suggested that society has become essentially troubling for adolescents due to pressure to deal with uncertainty, insecurity and risk

5.2.

- Young people may therefore take risks and use pleasure to regulate the boundaries of self control

5.3.

- This regulation can lead to a sense of identity and empowerment.

- This regulation may become a coping strategy for the uncertainty of the Risk Society.

5.4.

- Many of the debates central to postmodernism can be used to extend the application of dialogue surrounding the Risk Society to adolescent drug use

5.5.

- Care must be taken not to overestimate individualisation, negate the political construction of risk, rely too heavily on scientific or technological risks alone, highlight the negativity of risk taking or a generalisable sense of self and to omit distinctions in types of risks, in the least types of drug

5.6.

- Any suggestions as to methods of intervention must account for the social conditions of risk taking whilst acknowledging individual accountability

5.7.

- The working description of risk requires amendment to incorporated the conditions of the Risk Society.

The Dichotomies of Risk Taking Behaviour

It is important to understand how and why individuals become involved in risk taking from broad theoretical standpoints before the discussion looks in detail at specific factors. Once the parameters of 'risk taking' in the context of this study have been defined, and the consequences for adolescents themselves noted, the question of whether risk taking is functional or problematic will be raised and investigated.

How an individual deals with risk or uncertainty is central to his or her sense of agency and can be categorised by the classification of certain groups of people. It became apparent whilst classifying the literature in this area that for each agent the risky decision making process is dichotomised in a variety of ways: rational or intuitive, voluntary or involuntary, normal or deviant, negative or positive, functional or problematic? The preliminary discussions are cited here as alternatives to the scope of this research and can be used as markers of distinction. As the chapter continues, and possible pathways are discarded, the crux of this topic becomes clear.

6.0. Rational or Intuitive Decision Making?

6.01. Mathematical Calculation

In the early days of risk theory the mechanisms of dealing with risk were based on mathematical calculation, assuming a degree of rational and conscious deliberation. As early as 1921 it was noted that if the outcome is unknown but the odds are known then the situation is subjected to risk. Further, if the odds are also unknown, the situation is one of uncertainty (Knight 1921 in Adams 1995: 25). However, even earlier than this,

in the seventeenth century the properties of expected utility theory were being used and developed.

> Our standard of what is 'good'... comes mainly from the expected utility hypothesis in economics, which says that when presented with a series of options, people should (and perhaps will) choose the option that has the highest expected value

<div align="right">Heimer (1988: 497)</div>

Problems with expected utility stem from the model's principle of marginal utility. It assumes that if two people were gambling, a £100 win for a relatively rich person would mean the same as a £100 win for a relatively poor person. The context of such risk decisions, noted in the previous chapter, is ignored under this hypothesis. It cannot be assumed that value or utility will represent the same value gain for all parties. Bernoulli's (1738/1967) solution via the 'diminishing marginal utility model' also has its flaws in its assumption that people are uniformly risk averse (in Lopes in Bell & Bell 1993: 32). Prospect theory was a reworking of expected utility theory by the addition of a probability weighting function, first developed by Kahneman & Tversky in 1979 (Lopes in Bell & Bell 1993: 35). In relation to decision making, prospect theory centres on the relationship between stimulus and response.

> The mere fact that an event is possible may give it certain credence, of magnitude insufficiently sensitive to the size of the objective probability.

<div align="right">(Rogers 1997: 747)</div>

6.02. Rational Choice

The rational choice model cements ideas of probability and expected utility in terms of optimal decision making. If mistakes are made by the rational actor, they do not occur

due to biases in human judgement but as 'unsystematic' products of probability (Gilovich & Griffin 2002: 1). Rational choice theory supposes that individuals are 'purposeful and goal directed and willing to satisfy their interests subject to certain constraints' (Gardner 1993 in Bell & Bell 1993: 70).

Rational choice theory is fundamentally flawed by its assumption that all individuals are rational, and does not consider the thought-less decision. In defence, advocates of rational choice theory explain that 'rationality is a quality of choices – instrumental to a person's goal in a given context' (Gardner 1993 in Bell & Bell 1993: 73). Probability theories, such as expected utility, are also limited in their inability to contend with the reasons why some people can be motivated to avoid bad outcomes (risk averse/security minded) or to achieve good outcomes (risk seeking/potential minded) (Lopes in Bell & Bell 1993: 44). There is also censure over the suggestion that actual risk can be calculated at all, due to the fact that perceived loss in given situations varies among individuals (Anderson *et al.* in Bell & Bell 1993: 168).

Further criticism stems from the margins of error in quantitative risk measurement, and the rejection of the diverse meaning of appraised risk.

> In spite of the highly sophisticated methods in assessing the personal judgements in decision analysis, many studies demonstrate that only a low percentage of decisions follow the rules of normative decision analysis. In other words, people often fail to select the decision option with the highest expected value.

> (Jaeger *et al.* 2002 in Boyne 2003: 69)

Adams (1995: 54) uses the example of a Grand Prix driver, who is more skilful than average, better informed about the dangers of the car and of the track, but no less likely to have an accident. The racing driver is simply more likely to take risks to achieve

rewards. Natalier (2001: 66) extends this in relation to motorcycle riding to highlight the need to investigate the symbolic meaning of the act. Lundborg & Lindgren (2002: 165) in their study of risk perception and alcohol consumption among young people, clearly state

> As with most risks, it is the perceived or subjective risks of such events, rather than the real risks, which the individual reacts upon in a decision context. Different individuals have different perceptions of risks and different risk preferences, which may, in part, explain the different choices made.

With specific links to the Risk Society and the risk model, Davis (1999: 12) suggests that risky decision making cannot be accounted for by traditional economic or administrative reasoning. Specifically for young people the 'best choice/least cost' equation is overridden by many other external factors, which at the very least account for personal definitions, localisms and cultural contexts (*ibid.*). Davis continues to acknowledge that the most influential factors for explaining adolescent risk taking are lack of experience and the desire to experiment. Gerrard *et al.* (2003: 76) proposes that most young people do not rationally intend to begin engaging in activities such as alcohol or drug use.

> Their risk behaviour was not planned or intentional; instead, it was a reaction to a social situation they encountered, in which there was an *opportunity* to do some thing risky.

In light of such findings, and the awareness of contradicitons with the focus of this study, the need to explain the 'irrationalities' of such behaviour required additional thinking.

During the 1960s and 1970s a revolution in the field occurred with the development of acknowledged 'biases'; speculative explanations for human error. It was suggested that there needed to be a solution to the inadequacies of probability that 'attempted to modify expected utility theory to describe reality better' (Heimer 1988: 491) and gave evidence that helped us understand how people decide and perceive their choices. Tversky & Kahneman developed experiments that showed that 'the rules underlying decision-making are considerably more complex than this hypothesis (expected utility) suggests'. They were concerned that 'even people with sophisticated statistical training or training in causal thinking were typically unable to overcome these biases when they were thinking intuitively (Tversky & Kahneman 1972, 1974 in *ibid.*).

The fathers of the heuristics field were keen to state that such biases were not direct reversals of rational choice and therefore not irrational behaviour. As part of the normative intuitive responses of individuals, such simplistic biases made sense, and were not accounted for by deviancy, exceptionality or laziness (Gilovich & Griffin 2002: 3). Under certain conditions (misrepresentation of sample size, base rates and regression from the mean) heuristics and biases provide 'subjectively compelling and often quite sensible solutions to ... judgemental problems (*ibid.*:4). Specific heuristics; availability and representativeness, will be touched upon in detail in Chapter Six. The anchoring heuristic, the misjudgement of base rates, has not been included in this study. Of the three primary heuristics, anchoring and adjustment is alienated by its exception to the process of attribute substitution, again referred to in Chapter Five. In addition, its reliance on numerical judgements conflicted with substance and context of this study's

data collection. As acknowledged by Kahneman & Fredrick (2002: 56) the trio is better served by the inclusion of the affect heuristic, discussed in section 6.5 of this chapter.

Tversky & Kahneman are criticised for their reluctance to include voluntary risk taking in their hypotheses, viewing all risky activity as negative (Heimer 1988: 509). Since they believe that the possible rewards need to be worth taking the risk, there is no concern for the risky act itself. In addition, critics have stood alarmed at the heuristical notion that 'human decision makers are systematically flawed bumblers' (Ortmann & Hertwig in Gilovich & Griffin 2002: 8). If we are all predetermined to make errors of judgement how has humankind endured the tests of evolution whereby only the best decision makers survived? In defence of their discipline Gilovich & Griffin (2002) cite evolution as the process of simply being 'fitter' than the rest; judgements need not be optimal for survival, simply better than a rival.

In relation to young people this thesis has acknowledged that to take risks may be beneficial to cope with the strains of the Risk Society. Therefore we are already appreciating that factors external to the rational cognition of the individual are at work. As a result we also admit that young people are no longer naturally risk averse, nor do they select the risk with the highest expected utility. We could argue that such utility is the affirmation of the self, however this is recognised as simply a by-product of risk taking and only of secondary concern to the individual, if rationalised at all. The example of cannabis use can be brought in here. It is accepted that to engage in such an act is an actual risk. We can also see from this research that young people also perceive it as such (see Graph 6.0 below, although some would dispute, see Hammersley et al. 2001). In terms of expected utility the benefits of cannabis use cannot be assessed mathematically, or conclusions reached on its highest expected value. Rather, if utility

can be addressed in terms of enjoyment or socialisation (namely experience) then some assumptions can be made. However such are contrary to the definitions stated above with regard to calculation rather than intuitive reasoning. Given the restraints placed on young people, socially and financially, perhaps this alternative description of utility is the only one appropriate. However such rigid theories do not encompass the influence of external variables on the process of rational action. It is this point to which this research is devoted. Therefore the focus will turn to the investigation of umbrella heuristics (as overarching themes rather than empirical testing of availability, representativeness and affect) and associated risk perceptions rather than actuality. However the fact that voluntary participation in risk is not directly theorised by heuristic commentators also poses questions for this research. If we consider that participation in cannabis use is for the most part voluntary (acknowledging peer influence as an external bias) then some comment on this aspect is now necessary.

6.1. Voluntary or Involuntary Risk Taking?

The dare has been declared. Leave behind the speed limits, the smoke free zones, tight deadlines, the low fat shopping list, the SPF-15 (suncream) routine and yell in the face of life

(Macken 1998 Sydney Morning Herald in Lupton 1999: 149)

For a long time the risk discipline looked primarily at involuntary risk – those which could not be controlled by the individual. The Risk Society focuses on such concerns, and the inability of its members to actively respond to primary risks. It is noted that an alternative response is to deal with secondary risks, or those risks personally created or embraced by the individual themselves. The ability to control and manage these secondary risks aids the path of uncertainty and development of self identity. This liberal realism in relation to risk taking has taken time to emerge.

Slanger & Rudestam. (1997: 355) notes that during the first half of the century, physical risk taking was seen as a sign of pathology, where 'psychoanalytically orientated theorists regarded physical risk taking as counterphobic behaviour and expressive of a death wish'. It is stated that towards the middle of the century this belief began to change with the acceptance that physical risk taking, for example participating in risky sports, was motivated by a desire for excitement. During the 1960s, following on from the work of Starr (1969 in Horvath & Zuckerman 1993), Zuckerman and others pioneered the investigation into sensation seeking with measures calculated on his Sensation Seeking Scale and Thrill and Adventure Seeking subscale. Further work highlighted that young people (studied mainly undergraduates) could be defined as high or low sensation seekers dependent on the level of risk they were prepared to take. The omission of a social theory of voluntary risk taking subsequently inspired many writers to begin their own research.

> Social scientific literature on risk analysis sees an ignorance of research on voluntary risk taking. This is due, 'in part, to the dominance of a psychological model of risk taking behaviour that views rewards as the primary motivation for risk taking behaviour
>
> (Heimer 1988: 509)

> This approach, however, cannot be reconciled with one of the principal features of voluntary risk taking – the fact that some people place a higher value on the experience of risk taking than they do on achieving the final ends of the risky undertaking
>
> Lyng (1990: 852)

6.12. More Than a Means to an End

Thus literature grew in the area of voluntary risk taking, with the emphasis on the experience of the risky act as a goal, rather than simply a means to an end. The terms risk and danger began to be used synonymously with phrases such as 'adrenalin rush', 'excitement', 'escape' and 'breaks from routine' (Lupton 1999: 150). Cohen & Taylor coined the phrase 'escape attempts' back in 1976 (revised 1992).

> We do not want a world in which the guarantee of no longer dying of hunger is exchanged for the risk of dying of boredom
>
> (Cohen &Taylor 1976/92: 164 in Lupton 1999: 157)

Risk taking for the 'thrill' was now analysed, not in terms of ignorance or stupidity, but conscious decision making. It is however suggested that some adolescents may take risks in full ignorance of the possible consequences, and do not make informed judgements about their behaviour. This issue will be returned to in Chapter Seven.

Based on this new acceptance of voluntary risk taking, in 1990, Stephen Lyng wrote a highly influential article in which he defined the process of voluntary risk-taking as 'edgework'. He concluded that acts of edgework 'all involve a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or ones sense of an ordered existence' where the 'threat of death or injury is ever-present', and claimed that 'only those who don't know what they're doing are at risk' Lyng (1990: 857). His article highlighted the contradictions of society (similarly to Giddens' work) where the active pursuit of safety and danger live together. His work in pioneered an explanation of psychological factors, and the social context in which they are expressed. Such a balance is also adhered to in this research.

Chan & Rigakos (2002: 748) are cynical of Lyng's work, and criticise his analysis for being 'rooted in male experience only'.

Lyng's analysis cannot adequately speak for either women or radicalised minorities since...he fails to seek empirical evidence to support such an analysis.

Walklate (in Chan & Rigakos 2002: 749) also points out that his analysis 'reinforces the traditional cultural images of men and women' and fails to acknowledge that women's experiences of risk taking and edgework may be different. The evidence from Chapter Four reinforces this point, however it may be the case that the use of edgework is the same but used differently in relation to gender specific risk taking.

6.13. Societal Acceptance

Functional risk taking for certain activities is now widely acknowledged. Slanger & Rudestam (1997: 355) note that even the media have come to accept that some level of risk taking is advantageous for the healthy existence of society. Furthermore the coping strategies for life in the current era have been noted. However acceptance of risky sports has not overflowed entirely into all societal activities. In the recent era influenced greatly by the onset of safety and risk aversion, any positive connotations traditionally associated with risk-taking (created by the original definition of risk), are sometimes over shadowed by condemnation. 'Consequently, in many situations, 'to take risks' is to court social disapproval' (Furedi 1998: 18).

It may follow that it is only the socially acceptable risks which are viewed by the majority as functional to individuals and to society. Engels & Bogt (2000: 676) agree that activities such as smoking and drinking 'fulfil important functions and can be an

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essential aspect of psychological development'. Denscombe's conclusion amounted to the same (2001a). It is therefore necessary to analyse the voluntary activities which are grouped under the heading of risky behaviour as a basis for a discussion of functional properties. Such an analysis will take place here.

Such changes in the acceptance of voluntary risk taking have occurred simultaneously with changes in society. The conditions of the Risk Society have forced experts and lay persons alike to consider voluntary engagement in risk. No longer are young people passive pawns in a societal game of chess, conditioned by the strategic tactics of risk avoidance. To make the link, the previous chapters polarised the risk discipline into living at risk (insecurity) and taking risks (uncertainty). The preoccupation with the former, namely involuntary risks, is now overtaken by the application of the Risk Society to voluntary risks, the latter. However the parameters for investigating voluntary risk taking under new social conditions are not clearly described. Therefore it is necessary to develop a new way of thinking without rejecting those theories which have gone before. This research aims to test whether the broad concepts of the aforementioned heuristics can be applied to voluntary risk taking in the Risk Society. The heuristic which has the most bearing on the issue of voluntary participation is the most under researched: that of affect. This research also attempts to investigate this bias.

6.2. Normal or Deviant?

As an aside the question of normality is also asked of this discussion. Is voluntary risk taking undertaken by a minority of deviant young people? Or is such behaviour to be considered normal?

Risk taking and experimentation during adolescence are considered normal behaviour because they help adolescents achieve independence, identity and maturity.

(Jack 1989 in Plant &Plant 1992: 115)

potentially risky behaviours like cigarette smoking, marijuana use, and alcohol consumption is rather normal among young people. The picture is rather similar for adolescent delinquency...Thus to some extent, non-experimentation...might be considered as statistically deviant

(Engels & Bogt 2001: 676)

These comments are in line with the normalisation thesis devised by Howard Parker in the mid to late 1990s. However Shiner & Newburn (1997: 511) have challenged this and commented that in particular, drug use, 'has some distance to travel before it assumes the role of a 'normalised' activity'.

This thesis has shown that the majority of young people are risk takers (as defined by the respondents themselves). However participation in different types of risk is not as standardised. Although tobacco and alcohol use is shown to be high, levels of drug use and criminal behaviour remain lower. The obvious unreliability of self report studies in relation to comparable illegal acts are however noted. Therefore given the evidence it is suggested that risk taking has become normalised *throughout* adolescences, whereas only some risky activities show specific signs of normalisation. Given the current social climate discussed in Chapter Five this shift is accepted.

If it is acknowledged then that adolescent risk taking will occur at relatively normal rates, rather than specific to a subsection of deviants, argument needs to be directed toward the image and portrayal of those in question.

6.3. Negative or Positive Risk Taking?

6.31. Societal Demonisation

Adolescent risk taking is not necessarily negative, as can be shown with data from this research (Chapter Four) and others (Lupton & Tulloch 2002). However, an analysis of local Audits for the surrounding area of the researched school cited reference to terms as abstract as 'rowdy behaviour' and 'youth nuisance' (___ Council 2001, 2004[1]). The media play a significant role in the demonisation of youth, by which many in society equate 'problem youth' with drugs, alcohol, violence and anti social behaviour (Miles 2000: 71). Loader (1996) uses terms such as 'unproductive', 'unsocialised', and 'hostile' to make such points. The media have a lot to answer for in the perception of youth as a time of negative behaviour, and young people, particularly young males (Pearson 1994 in Croall 1998: 132, Loader 1996: 24), are often stereotyped as doing such. Thus

> in a cultural context where it sometimes appeared that to be young in itself constituted a reason for being regarded as one of the 'usual suspects'

(Pearson 1994 in Croall 1998: 123)

To divide the issue of demonisation is to locate the discussion of youth as either problematic and in need of control (for others or themselves) or vulnerable and in need of care (Loader 1996: 25). To talk in terms of impulsive and immature risk takers or 'at risk' youth makes clear reference to the discussion of insecurity and uncertainty presented in Chapter Five (section 5.1 and 5.2).

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[1] The name has been removed for confidentiality.

Problems of definition can arise due to contextual differences, mainly noted by the generation gap. Gonzalez *et al.* (1994: 701) notes that socially acceptable behaviour is usually defined by adult norms. It is not clear if adolescents differ from adults in their interpretation of the word 'risky' (Alexander *et al.* 1990: 559), nevertheless there are more activities that are socially unacceptable for adolescents yet acceptable for adults. Alexander *et al.*'s conclusions indicated that 'young adolescents describe both physically daring events and rule breaking as risky behaviours... delinquent and physically daring behaviours are perceived similarly'. It is suggested that petty crimes, disobeying parental rules and other forms of rule breaking, are sufficient to fulfil the need for excitement just as well as more serious deviance. It is questionable as to whether adult terminology appreciates this context.

6.32. Academic Terminology

Theoretical debate in the 1960s and 1970s did much to strengthen this negative image, specifically using the phrase 'problem behaviour' to relate to concepts of sensation seeking (Zuckerman 1964) and personal fable (Elkind 1967) to name just two. Lyng notes that Goffman conceptualised such behaviour as 'action' defined as consequential for the individual, that has problematic outcomes, and that is undertaken for its own sake (1967: 185 in 1990: 862). Examples used include 'high risk occupations and leisure activities, combat experience, drug use and the like'.

> Problem behaviour co-occurs within individuals to form problem behaviour syndrome. This syndrome contributes to a state of transition proneness that provides adolescents and young adults with a means of achieving developmental objectives, such as experimentation with adult roles and identity exploration.

(Bingham & Shope 2004: 206)

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The activities in questions may not differ to those under discussion here. However, the use of terminology such as 'problem behaviour' is avoided due to its inability to acknowledge any positive product of such activities. Risk taking for adolescents (used more appropriately here although connotations do differ as discussed in Chapter Two) is, like adults, not necessarily problematic. Risky sports such as rock climbing are socially acceptable for young people alike and are not necessarily undertaken through ignorance or coercion (Gardener in Bell & Bell 1993: 66). Risk terminology is more appropriately used for adolescent activity rather than any mention of problem behaviour. This is not to negate the serious consequences of some risk behaviours, but given the evidence presented in Chapter Four, problem status is perhaps over-emphasised. Some researchers, including Benthin *et al.* (1993), separate their list of adolescent activities into problem behaviours (such as drugs, alcohol, binge eating, and sex) and other behaviours (riding motorcycles and bicycles, skiing and sunbathing), which shows at least an acknowledgement of a possible distinction.

The key concern here is obviously the use of terminology. Although academia is starting to acknowledge the functions of adolescent risk taking, it may be overshadowed by real world literature (e.g. the media or aforementioned local Audits). The perceptions of wider society are perhaps of more importance than the intricacies of academic debate. The development of labelling theory is well documented and further reference to it is not necessary here. Rather with the notions of control and identity affirmation central to such behaviour, and in light of the Risk Society, what effect is such a label having on our 'problem' youth? (see MORI research into media portrayal, and Wells 2004).

This research was able to make specific comment on this issue. It found that some young people in the sample (14.6% of total, 16.4% of males and 13.1% of females), although self-reporting risk involvement, were keen to avoid the negative label associated with adolescent risk taking. This path of analysis focused on the additional comments written by the young people in response to a detailed description of an associated activity.[2] They were found to justify decision making or to portray a risk averse image. These additional comments were predominantly twofold; they either defended their actions (it wasn't really risky, I was supervised, he deserved it, I didn't do it), or renounced their actions (it was an accident, I am not a risk taker). These remarks were made by similar proportions of males and females and spanned all age groups. Here we see a group of young people who were appealing against the negative label of careless and thoughtless risk takers. They reduced the representation of enjoyment, spontaneity, thrills and excitement to sensibility, rationality and often regret. The detailed results are shown in tabular form below.

Table 6.0. Neutralising the risk

Question	Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Risk	Smoked	17	F	Nothing illegal though, just normal cigarettes
Danger	Taken drugs	16	F	But not like heroin, just cannabis
Danger	Messing about in deep end of the swimming pool	14	F	Other things that weren't dangerous to me
School	Talking back etc	15	F	Nothing major
School	Acting silly in class	15	M	Not to the whole class, probably just the person/friend sat next to me
School	Talking, answered back	15	F	Not anything major (really bad)
Parents	Just not tidying up	14	M	Nothing really bad

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[2] Questioned about risk specifically and its associated terms

This neutralisation was used to defend the risk taking act. Predominantly such justification compared an activity to one which would be perceived by themselves, and others as being of higher risk.

Table 6.1 Stressing safety precautions

Question	Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Risk	Lighting fireworks	15	M	Supervised by parents
Danger	Ride on a motorbike with my Dad	16	F	But always wear the correct safety equipment
Danger	Fireworks	15	M	Supervised

These responses again defended the actions of the grounds of safety. Such a justification was used to lower the perceived risk.

Table 6.2 Justifying the risk

Question	Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Danger	Sitting in the middle of the road and waiting for a car to come	13	M	This man used a lot of verbal abuse against me but I deserved it
School	Set alarm off, shout at teachers	16	F	Only when they are unfair
School	Swearing, being late, forgetting things, calling people names	15	M	But as a joke
Parents	Being disobedient, lying to them, misbehaving	14	F	General teenage upsets

The comments made by these respondents again defended the risk by claiming the recipient deserved it or negated the action via general acceptance (of humour and adolescence).

Table 6.3 Denial

Question	Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
School	Stole some dust caps	14	M	But I didn't steal them and I got blamed

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In this example we see outright renunciation whereas in the table below the respondents showed remorse for their actions.

Table 6.4 Highlighting guilt

Question	Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Risk	Getting drunk, being in places where I'm not meant to be, lying to my parents	14	F	Which I regret
Best Friend	Left my friend out	14	F	I felt guilty
Best Friend	Kicked a ball at his head	14	M	By accident
Parents	Almost killed my brother	14	M	Did not mean to

Finally the table below highlights those respondents who were directly appealing against the 'risk taker' label. This was done by either stating that the question was not applicable to them or by stressing that a comparatively minor risk may be all they engaged in.

Table 6.5 Disassociate from risk taking

Question	Activity	Age	Sex	Comments
Risk	Walking down to the shops at night without parents knowing	15	M	Not really a dangerous person
Best Friend	None stated	15	M	I have not really done anything
School	None stated	15	F	I've never been in any serious trouble at school

The results help once again to bind together the social forces of the Risk Society and the behaviour of young people. As suggested in the previous chapter, Davis notes that in order to cope with the social injustices of everyday life, problems are confronted with 'collective justification' (section 5.01). Such justifications were related by Davis to the techniques of neutralisation highlighted by David Matza (1964, 1990). It is possible to follow this lead and link the above findings to Matza's work. Young people are susceptible to risk taking during this stage of their life course and may take control of

such decisions to deal with the uncertainty of social life. In turn, and somewhat disproportionately negative labels are attached to this period of life. To justify their risk taking behaviour to themselves and to society, it has been found that for some, techniques of neutralisation are applied. If risk taking is used to enable the management of life in the Risk Society, neutralisation techniques are used to justify engaging in the behaviour itself. We see that the application of techniques once reserved for group action, are now apparent on an individual level. In an era defined by individual rather than collective responsibility, it follows that the individual is left to justify their actions to the society which in some respect forced them towards the act in the first place.

Hammersley *et al.* (2001) make the link between such mitigating statements and cannabis use. They suggest that the criminalisation of cannabis and subsequent stigmatisation of detection encourages such statements as those found in the tables above. This research not only links techniques of neutralisation to cannabis use, but to the wider remit of risk taking behaviour. The inclusion of cannabis related mitigation by this sample of young people also grounds this activity in the context of risk, and further supports its focus for this study.

It is apparent that some young people attempt to portray a risk averse image. A possible explanation for this may be that it is a response to the negative and problematic perceptions of many of the activities inherent to risk taking. If we continue to believe that meaning and self are acquired through interaction, to portray a negative meaning is to promote a negative self. This is in direct contrast to the argument for purposeful risk taking. Young people are attempting to cope with the uncertainties of everyday life yet at the same time have to defend or deny any positive outcomes to the rest of society (as

seen in the tables above). The perception of youth must change if we are to help young people cope effectively with adolescence and their social world.

6.4. Functional or Problematic?

> It is also true that unless this process of making self-defining choices is undertaken in the adolescent years, then the transition to adulthood will be problematic.
>
> we might define identity as the process of making choices which allow one to live effectively as an adult and identity itself is a functional[3] life script.

(Head 1997: 7, 10)

We accept from this discussion that adolescents voluntarily engage in a range of risky behaviours, and although making decisions somewhat independently, that the agent is also controlled by structural forces and heuristic biases. In relation to the function of such risk taking the argument has been provided in favour of the development of self identity. In addition, the responsibility of society to support risk taking and to reject negative portraits has also emerged as paramount. On this basis 'function' is used to describe acts which hold some positive purpose for the participant. The antithesis of such has been labelled problematic to stress a detrimental level of negative consequences.

But which risky behaviours serve the most purpose? There are two types of function that are being addressed here. Firstly, the ability to actively seek risk to cope with the pressure of society via the aspect of control. Secondly, the ability to confirm identity through the participation in risk. Which decisions hold the most benefit? The previous chapter acknowledged that work of Denscombe (2001a) who provided evidence to link identity and smoking. The work of Duff (2004) and the element of control was also

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[3] The author noted the use of this word relates to the need for 'realism and coherence' rather than a prescriptive normative interpretation

noted. In contrast, Melucci (1992 in Miles 2000: 155) has outlined the dysfunctional properties of heroin use. Therefore it is not suggested that all types of risky behaviours could be used positively or that legal or soft illegal drugs do not have the potential to become problematic. For example, Carroll (2000) found that 10% of those who try cannabis go on to be heavy users. The following results aim to shed some light on this dialogue. Asking the respondent to show via a Likert scale their attitude to risk produced the following results.

6.41. Perceptions of Risk

Graph 6.0 Percentage of respondents who thought the following activities were risky
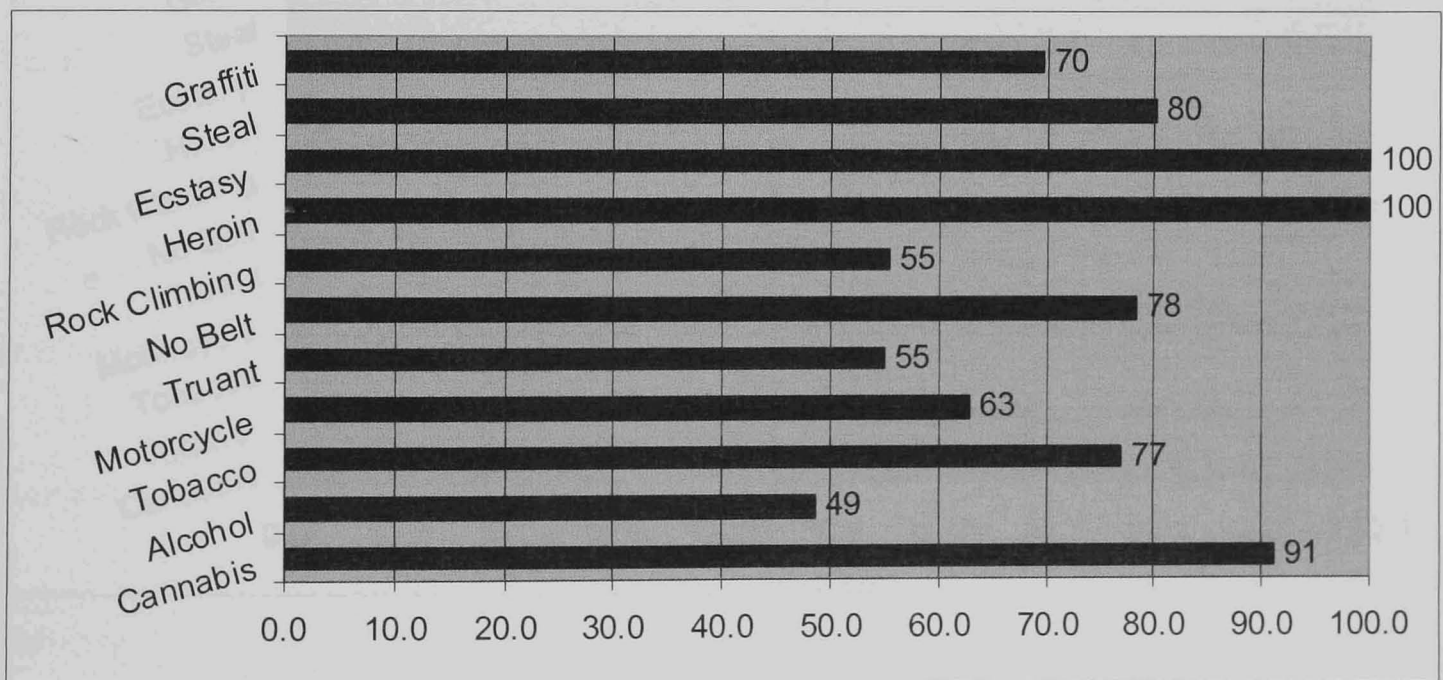
For risks with inferred social acceptability similar high levels of perceived risk and levels of previous participation were found (also see Graph 4.0). For those at the opposite end of the acceptability scale, an inverse relationship between risk perception (high) and previous participation (low) is observed. One anomaly is the use of alcohol which was not perceived as risky and had high levels of use. The functional qualities of the first relationship (social acceptability) and the problematic overtones of alcohol are introduced here.

6.42. Perceptions of Worth

In addition, the sample was asked to suggest whether the given activities were worth the risk. There is less of an obvious pattern in these results. Many of the socially acceptable risks were considered of low worth (tobacco, truanting, no seatbelt). Further, those with highest levels of worth (alcohol, motorcycle and rock climbing) were perceived to be of low risk and had variable levels of participation.

Graph 6.1 Percentage of respondents who thought the following activities were worth the risk
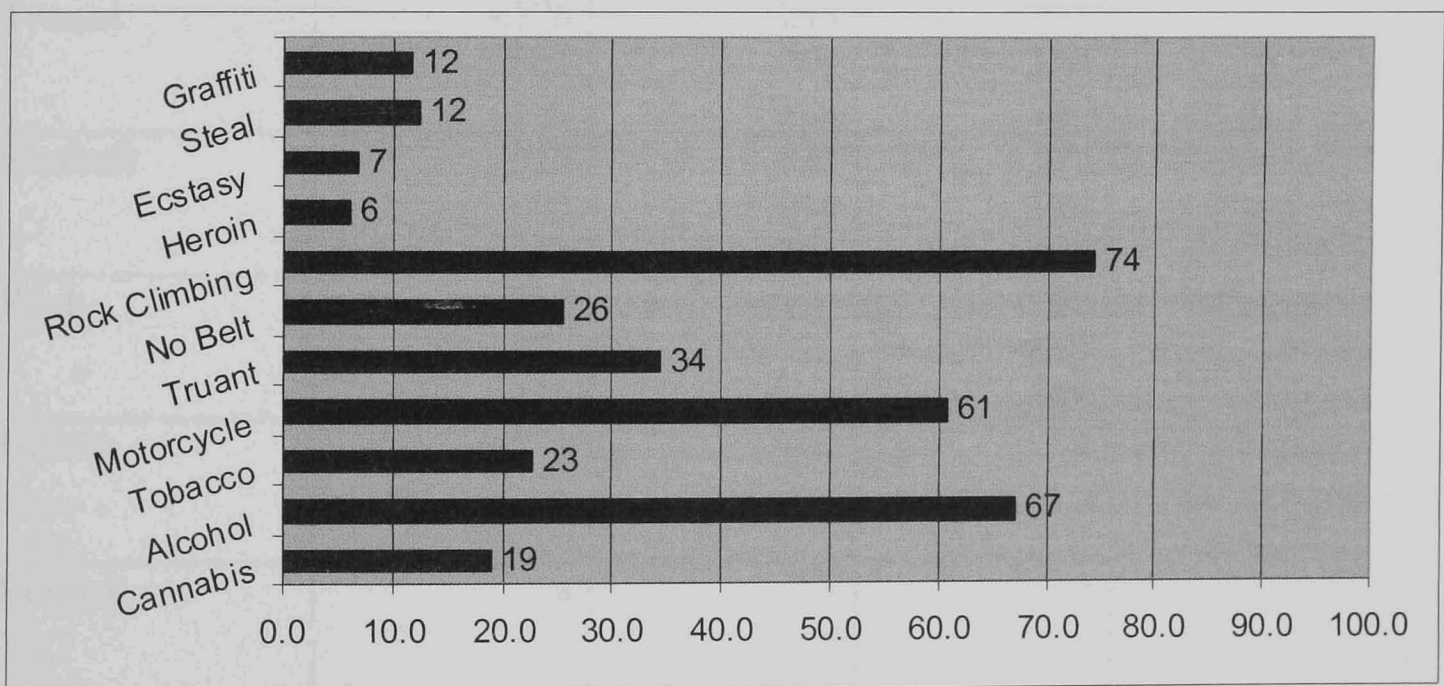
Table 6.6. The Relationships Between Perceived Risk, Worth and Having Ever Tried (a cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant)

R Sig N	Risky/Worth	Tried/Worth	Tried/Risky
Cannabis	-.470 .000 145	.513 .000 99	-.415 .000 98
Alcohol	-.304 .000 144		
Tobacco	-.356 .000 143	.271 .003 120	-.199 .030 120
Motorcycle	-.311 .000 141	.228 .015 112	
Truant	-.276 .001 139	.248 .009 109	-.330 .001 107
Seatbelt	-.319 .000 143	.229 .010 125	-.255 .004 127
Rock	-.252 .003 136		-.296 .003 100
Heroin	a		a
Ecstasy	a		a
Stealing		.417 .000 95	
Graffiti		.307 .002 99	-.253 .013 96

Table 6.6 also shows the relationship between these three variables: perceived risk, perceived worth and having ever tried. The significant relationships ($p < 0.05$) remain. We see a pattern emerging in the relationship between perceived risk and perceived worth. The perception of risk did not affect the perception of worth for the non-drug criminal acts. For all others (excluding those not measurable) the relationship was

significant. Alcohol and rock climbing are noted as the anomalies in the relationship between having tried the act and it's perceived worth, suggesting similar level of acceptability. Alcohol, motorcycle use and stealing were those not found to be significant in the relationship between having ever tried the act and the perceived level of risk. We see that on the whole the greater the perceived risk, the lower the perceived worth and the less the likelihood of having ever tried. In contrast the greater the level of participation the greater the level of worth. These relationships were the strongest for the use of cannabis.

6.43. Comparing Health-Related Behaviours

As the focus of this research has been on health related behaviours and the element of control the following substances have been selected for analysis to add to this discussion of functional or problematic risk taking.

Table 6.7 Risk Profiles: Percentage of positive responses (i.e. risky, harmful, worried, worth it, tried it)

	Perceived Risk	Perceived Harm	Perceived Worry	Perceived Worth	Having Ever Tried
Cannabis	91.2	76.9	75.2	19.0	31.7
Alcohol	48.6	49.3	18.2	67.1	98.0
Tobacco	76.9	81.1	63.9	22.6	68.5
Heroin	100.0	95.1	95.2	6.1	2.5
Ecstasy	100.0	94.4	95.2	6.8	6.1

All the above substances were included in this study based on a literature review which outlined their affiliation with the word risk, thus profiles of their associated appraisal could be compiled from each specific risk related question. The majority of respondents perceived all the activities as risky apart from alcohol. To allow comparisons to be made with the perception of risk, the aspect of harm was investigated. This concept is aligned with the definitions provided by Chapter Two and described predominantly as a

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negative outcome. The majority of activities were perceived as harmful except alcohol, indeed, more than half the sample thought drinking alcohol was not harmful. Following on the theme of anxiety outlined in the Chapter Five, the extent of worry about possible risks was also investigated. A significant difference was observed in relation to the concern over alcohol use. The final question analysed here involved the belief that the risks of the activity in question were worth taking. Overwhelmingly alcohol was the only substance considered by the majority to be worth the risk.

In relation to the evidence for the use and perception of cannabis the following must first be commented on. It is often suggested that alcohol is used by young people to escape from reality and confirm identity via social interaction and group action. Carrol (2000, cited in Duff 2004) found that among their 15-24 year old sample of Australian young people, cannabis was commonly regarded as very similar to alcohol in terms of its negative consequences, and similar conclusions were provided by Hammersley *et al.* (2001). The Risk Profile given here show a very stark difference in the use and perception of risk for both cannabis and alcohol. The unrealistic perception of alcohol (note definition given by Head 1997) as neither risky nor harmful, provoking minor levels of concern about possible risks and of great worth is extremely worrying. This is then coupled with particularly high levels of participation. In addition if it is the process of risk taking that is of most use and the functional aspect of redeeming a sense of control which provides the greatest benefit from risky acts, then the main issue here is that alcohol use was not consider to be a risk! It is concluded that alcohol use has significantly more problematic overtones than any of the other substances. The relative levels of risk associated with heroin and ecstasy use were noted by the respondents alongside low levels of worth and use, and although the functional tag is not applied here, such a realistic appreciation is commended.

It may be expected that a similarity between tobacco and alcohol use and risk perception will be seen. These two substances can be linked in terms of status offences, legality, levels of social acceptability and the desire to look adult. However the only similarity seen from the Risk Profiles is levels of use, with unrealistic perceptions noted as the striking difference.

Cannabis and tobacco provoked more interesting discussion and were described by the respondents as having noticeably similar levels of worth. In relation to risk cannabis use was found to be riskier than tobacco, and one can assume this links to legality. This assumption can be reinforced by the evidence which shows that the sample also believed that tobacco use was more harmful that cannabis use. There are obvious differences in the levels of trying with tobacco being the substance of choice out of the two. Although again similar, levels of worry were also higher for cannabis. Again difficulties of access and legality could account for this. Such similarities in the Risk Profiles of cannabis and tobacco could also link their functional properties. Lyng (1990) once stated that risk taking only became problematic for those that didn't know what they were doing. The risk takers in this sample of young people did seem to acknowledge what they were doing; I'm using cannabis, I know it's risky and possibly harmful but I'm not overly concerned as I think it's worth it. The opposite can be said for alcohol.

Table 6.8 Risk Profiles of Tobacco Use

Ever used tobacco			Never used tobacco		
	yes	*no*		*yes*	*no*
Risky	67.5	32.5	Risky	86.5	13.5
Worried	49.4	50.6	Worried	81.6	18.4
Worth	34.5	65.5	Worth	8.3	91.7
Harm	76.5	23.5	Harm	88.6	11.4

Table 6.9 Risk Profiles of Cannabis Use

Ever used cannabis			Never used cannabis		
	yes	*no*		*yes*	*no*
Risky	67.7	32.3	**Risky**	97.0	3.0
Worried	30.0	70.0	**Worried**	91.0	9.0
Worth	50.0	50.0	**Worth**	6.0	94.0
Harm	54.8	45.2	**Harm**	84.4	15.6

Although when analysing the whole sample cannabis showed higher levels of perceived risk (see Graph 6.0), there were amazingly similar levels shown by those who had ever used both substances (67.5% tobacco, 67.6% cannabis). More tobacco users believed in the harmful properties of the substance, as did the whole sample. In contrast there were significantly higher percentages of cannabis users that thought the substance was worth the risk, indicating that those who used tobacco were not so sure. In addition higher numbers of tobacco smokers were worried about the risks involved. This evidence suggests that cannabis users tend to feel more positive about their use could support the functional element of cannabis use.

Table 6.10 Risk Profiles (Correlations) of Tobacco Use

Correlation Sig N	Risky	Worried	Worth	Harm
Ever tried tobacco	-.199 .030 120	-.304 .001 121	.271 .003 120	-.138 .138 116

Table 6.11 Risk Profiles (Correlations) of Cannabis Use

Correlation Sig N	Risky	Worried	Worth	Harm
Ever tried cannabis	-.415 .000 98	-.630 .000 97	.513 .000 99	-.319 .002 95

Tables 6.10 and 6.11 support this similarity link, with significant relationships apparent in all but participation in tobacco use and perceived harm. This evidence highlights the link between appraisals and previous experience which will be extended in Chapter Seven and referred to as the 'lived' experience (Lupton & Tulloch 2002).

In comparison with other health related risk taking, the sample showed a realistic risk appraisal of cannabis, and therefore had more positive properties than, for example, alcohol. However in comparison with other socially acceptable risky behaviours cannabis use does not compare as fortunately.

6.5. Emotive Decision Making

6.51 The Affect Heuristic

We can link this discussion to the recent development of the affect heuristic. Although more commonly used in the fields of sales, marketing and social cognition, 'affect': the conscious or unconscious feeling which produces a positive or negative stimulus, has fought through the era of reasoned based decision making and is now prominent on the risk agenda (Slovic *et al.* 2002). Taken initially from the ideas of Damasio (1994, in *ibid.*) and supported with empirical data stretching back to the 1960s, Paul Slovic and his colleagues have revisited their own work to support this renewed interest. Now commonly heralded as the third heuristic due to its action as a cognitive shortcut, affect has warranted further discussion, not least as a mechanism used to deal with risk and uncertainty.

Although analysis is certainly important in some decision making circumstances, reliance on affect and emotion is a quicker, easier and more efficient way to navigate in a complex, uncertain and sometimes dangerous world.

(ibid.: 398)

The experiential response, automatic and intuitive, firstly, as quoted here, links to the adolescent experience of the Risk Society. Giddens' work on risk and ontological security (self identity) talks of an emotive and unconscious concept, and thus the means of affirming such may also involve similar properties. Secondly as Slovic *et al.* (*2002*) continue, 'the experiential system automatically searches its menu bank for related events, including emotional compliments'. Such events are weighted in an evaluative process known as 'affective mapping' (*ibid.*: 405). Positive emotion then leads the individual to attempt to copy the recalled event based on a judgement of low risk high benefit; negative emotion suggest the event should be avoided based on a contrasting judgement of high risk, low benefit. The link between the availability heuristic (made by Slovic himself) and the current research's analysis of experience, coupled with images presented via knowledge based intervention and the impact of parents and peers is made in chapters Seven and Eight of this thesis.

In relation to the young subjects under investigation Slovic *et al.* (2002) raise examples of recent research into risk and emotion. Loewnstein (2001 *in ibid.*: 414) suggest that individuals have little fear of those acts which evolution has not prepared them for, and cites smoking as one example. Even when such threats are realised at a cognitive level, the emotive response becomes the most dominant. In earlier research Loewnstein (1987 *in ibid.*: 414) notes that emotive responses also prevail over cognition when time intervals occur between decisions and outcomes. The relevance to young people and health related risk taking is evident.

There are selected criticisms of the affect model that need to be raised. Firstly as Slovic acknowledges, affect is in development and has set out to open the stage for discussion. There is no investigation (at the time of publication) which acknowledges possible differences in gender applications of affect. Based on the conclusions noted in Chapter Four, it is possible to suggest that males and females would use affect in different ways. Although not designed for this purpose, affect only accounts for why individuals initiate risk taking behaviour rather than continue engagement. In earlier work, Slovic (2001) uses the affect heuristic to dispute the idea of the rational initiation of smoking, although the model does not equate for why smokers then continue to do so. The pessimistic conclusion to be taken from Slovic's work is that the experiential system fails to protect people from the consequences of their emotional decisions. In this case, affect offers no protection from the conditions of nicotine addiction. Alternatively it could be suggested that continued engagement becomes emotive based on the positive feelings absorbed from the substance and the consumption environment. Therefore could lived experience become the main contribution to the notion of affect for those that continue to use it?

Research has also highlighted that affective messages (manipulated by advertising campaigns) will also prevail over a factual input or a voice of reason (Epstein 1994, Finucane *et al.* 2000 in Slovic 2002: 416). The emotive response will overpower the desire to understand addiction, which is only fully understood when caught up in it (*ibid.*: 418).

The empirical data presented in section 6.43 shows that alcohol use was based on a positive image of the substance: low risk and high benefit. If alcohol is a positive emotive response, without realistic acknowledgement of the possible risks then should this act not be viewed as problematic? Given the increase in underage drinking and the current associated problems, these findings have some importance. Slovic argues that to tackle emotive decisions the image or feeling that the activity provokes must be addressed. Wilson *et al.* (2002: 185) note that external influences, often unwanted and unconsciously absorbed, shape internal evaluations of decision making opportunities. Such influences, frightfully named 'metal contamination' can derive from advertising.

Positive alcohol advertising is the only remaining commercially based influence on adolescent behaviour. The recent rulings on the limitations on role models, fun, sports etc in alcohol commercials (although not banned outright like tobacco advertising) may be proof of this point.

It is also noted that the use of ecstasy and heroin provoke a very negative image by the young respondents, resulting in subsequent low use: high risk, low benefit. Tobacco and cannabis use also provoke negative images of risk and harm. Neither of these substances are portrayed positively via advertising. However they show significantly higher levels of worth and participation: high risk, relatively higher benefit. If the overall image of the substance is low, what can we assume makes the risks worth taking? Can it be assumed that notions of control and self affirmation are working in sync here to relate more directly to the concepts of function and purpose?

6.6. Further Description

After consideration of the points raised in this chapter the descriptions of risk provided in Chapters Two and Four need further revision. The concept of risk for 'normal' young people needs to further recognise biases of rational judgement and the manipulation of perceptions coupled with possible positive outcomes.

To take a risk, subject to the conditions of the Risk Society, is to engage in socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviour where the outcome (positive or negative) of a specific danger/hazard (not necessarily physical) is not known with certainty. ***The additional consequences of active risk engagement can be the management of uncertainty and self development. The decision to voluntary engage in such a risk is further subject to biases of rational judgement.***

This discussion has provided an insight into the relevance of adolescent decision making to the study of risk and has made suggestions as to the functional or problematic properties of the use of cannabis. The following chapters look at these two areas in more detail. What factors influence cannabis based decisions and why is it important to understand them?

Summary

6.0

- Explanations of adolescent behaviour, which rely on the rational actor model and expected utility, do not address biases of judgement as effectively as the study of heuristics.

6.1

- Voluntary risk (to deal with uncertainty), rather than a preoccupation with involuntary risk (living with insecurity), needs to be the primary concern of researchers applying the conditions of the Risk Society to 'risk activists'.

6.2

- Voluntary risk taking, although not standardised by activity, is normalised throughout adolescence and not specific to deviant subgroups.

6.3

- The negative image associated with adolescent risk taking could become dysfunctional to adolescent development via the young persons active portrayal of risk aversion.

6.4

- The functional properties of risk taking can be divided into those using the element of control and those developing self identity.

- The use of alcohol is shown to have problematic appreciations, whereas cannabis (in comparison with other health related risks) has elements of realistic appraisal and participation for a purpose.

6.5

- The application of the affect model, included as relevant to the Risk Society confirms the above point.

6.6

- The working definition of risk requires amendment to incorporate the intuitive, voluntary, normal, positive, purposeful and emotive properties of associated behaviour.