1 Introduction: why study youth and risk?

Introduction

Despite competing understandings of what are or may be the risks young people face today, the identification of such risks as distinct social issues remains high on the public agenda. In the media, discussions abound about young people’s lives and the many real or imagined risks they may encounter or engage in, such as dropping out of school, engaging in binge-drinking or drug use, unhealthy dieting, ‘sexting’, and other digitally mediated practices. As such, young people’s lives and youth cultures continue to be subject to public scrutiny and ‘moral panics’ (Cohen, 2002) that position them as dangerous either to themselves or their surroundings. Sociologists have argued that youth can be seen as a metaphor for the future of society (for a recent example see Coffey et al., 2017). This means that young people engaging in ‘risky’ practices put their own futures at stake, and by extension that of society, too; a perspective that might explain the intensive interest in, and attempts at regulation of, young people’s lives both in Denmark and elsewhere.

This book argues for a new perspective on young people’s risk-taking practices within the sociology of youth. Situating risk-taking in everyday life, we seek to demonstrate that many young people who engage in these practices do so in a routinised way. By shifting focus to how young people synchronise, coordinate, and organise risk-taking practices in their everyday lives we wish to foreground risk-taking as made and re-made through concrete practices, and thereby redefine risk as something that does not exist independently of these social practices. Routines may seem insignificant and mundane but routines are, in their repetition, integral to the practices that make up everyday life. We argue that routines are key to understanding youth risk-taking as they not only capture practical, embodied competencies, but also tacit knowledge about how to navigate everyday life; normative signposts for what to do and not do. Consequently, routines have a logic, and this is what is in focus here.

This book has a dual purpose. First, it provides a sociologically informed contemporary analysis of young people’s engagement with some of the practices that are often termed risky practices – such as drug use, speeding, and getting into fights – illustrating the routinised and socially embedded
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character of such practices. Second, it poses an intervention in the field by drawing theoretical inspiration from underexplored practice theories to explore empirical data and thereby suggests new ways of analysing how such risk-taking practices are part of young lives. Following from this, another purpose is to reinvigorate the conceptual efforts to understand young people’s engagement in these practices.

Practice theory can be seen as an umbrella term for a cluster of theories that, despite differences, share a focus on practice by focusing on social life as processes and on the routinisation that makes up the everyday (Nicolini, 2013; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996, 2001; Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). While practice theories are not new, they are still to make their way in a sustained fashion into the sociology of youth as well as related fields such as criminology, social science substance use research, and social work. Drawing on the practice theoretical analytical framework enables us to show how youth risk-taking is a routinised practice embedded in and coordinated with a number of other practices in young people’s everyday life and, therefore, must also be managed within the context of everyday life. Furthermore, this approach enables us to view risk-taking as a set of practices that exist beyond the single participant, meaning that we can step away from individualistic explanations. By turning to practice theory, we insist on the value of a sociological approach to risk-taking, which situates this in the broader context of young people’s everyday lives. Paying close attention to young people’s practices is to challenge the notion that youth risk-taking can be explained and understood in a distant or objective way. Rather than judging young people’s risk-taking as irrational, we must focus on understanding the ‘logic’ of their risk-taking practices, as these are socially embedded, and centrally we must unpack the ways in which these practices interact with other key practices in young people’s everyday lives.

Sociologists and anthropologists alike have pointed out that risk is a cultural construct as well as a normative concept (see the seminal work of Douglas, 1986, 1992). When we stick to the term risk here, we do so for strategic reasons (White, Wyn, & Robards, 2017) – not because we want to represent young people’s engagement in these practices as inherently problematic, but because we believe that conceptualising risk-taking from a practice theoretical perspective enables us to construct risk-taking as essentially a social phenomenon existing beyond the individual. This means that our focus is not on young people’s individual behaviour or on risk objects, such as drugs, but on the practice – for example, of drug use – as an embodied and situated practice that can be constructed by some people (we as researchers, some users, social workers, politicians, and others) as a practice that may involve risk.

In this book we draw on empirical data from qualitative interviews and focus groups with young Danes about their involvement in risk-taking practices. Our turn to practice theory as the analytical framework is a consequence of our initial reflections on the data, notably the insight that the participants told us little about deliberately seeking out excitement, thrills, or situations where
they were ‘on the edge’ between control and loss of control, as the literature on voluntary risk-taking suggests they do (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002; Lyng, 1990; Zinn, 2017). Rather, their engagement in various risk-taking practices was an integrated part of their everyday lives and in that sense often routinised activities. To uncover these more mundane aspects we use four main dimensions of practice theory to guide our focus in the analytical chapters; that is, the routinised engagement with practices that are culturally meaningful, the interaction and coordination between risk-taking practices and other practices in young people’s lives, the embodied character of practices, and the embeddedness of practices in larger social structures. With this approach, we can, we believe, formulate a strong response to media, policy, and developmental approaches that too often focus on the individual young person’s risk-taking and target single behaviours as the point of concern.

Youth and ‘problem behaviours’

A large body of research across various disciplines seeks to document the causes and nature of young people’s ‘problematic’ actions. Behavioural economics approach this as a matter of (ir)rational decision-making and incentives (such as Booth & Nolen, 2012; Gruber, 2001). Developmental psychology focuses on low levels of self-control and lack of resilience (such as Reyna & Farley, 2006; Yates & Grey, 2012). And in the neurosciences, gaining much momentum today, research focuses on brain development, impulse control, and ‘dispositions’ towards risky behaviour (such as Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008; Galvan, Hare, Voss, Glover, & Casey, 2007; Steinberg, 2008). With few exceptions (such as Steinberg, 2007) this research can be seen as looking for single variables and causes to explain the dimensions and consequences of young people’s risk-taking practices by focusing on the individual and ‘pre-social’ young person (France, 2000).

One result of such approaches is the concept of ‘at risk youth’. This concept has gained huge traction amongst policy-makers and (some) practitioners across a range of geographical contexts, especially in health-focused research, educational research, and crime prevention research. This approach comes to underpin strategies for intervention by focusing efforts and resources on those most ‘at risk’. Other policy responses include campaigns and a focus on information, seemingly based on the assumption that ‘problem behaviours’ are simply poor choices based on a lack of information and/or misinformation. Examples of such campaigns in Denmark are the National Board of Health’s ‘Max 5’ campaign against binge-drinking (2007), ‘Only with a condom’ campaign for ‘safe sex’ (2017) and ‘Under the influence of music’ campaign against drug use at music festivals (2017). What these efforts have in common is a lack of acknowledgment of the social and (youth) cultural dynamics that shape and inform young people’s engagement with any of these practices, nor the complex interaction with other practices. Therefore, such prevention efforts are at best inefficient, because they do not resonate with
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young people’s own ‘lay’ experiences (Demant & Ravn, 2010; France, 2000), and at worst counter-productive and problematic, such as when Australian drug education promotes a view of young women’s substance use as more problematic than that of young men (Farrugia, 2017).

While sociological scrutiny of the emergence and uses of the ‘at risk youth’ approach to policy have been significant (see France, 2008; Kelly, 2001a, 2001b; te Riele, 2006, and a more in-depth discussion of this in Chapter 3), the popularity of (conceptual) risk research, both in sociology as a discipline and in youth sociology as a subfield, has seemingly declined over the last decade and left the stage to new theoretical developments and other analytical preoccupations. The early 2000s saw a number of conceptual developments in the sociology of youth (such as Crawshaw & Bunton, 2009; France, 2000; Green, Mitchell, & Bunton, 2000; Lawy, 2002; Lyng, 2005; Miller, 2005; Mitchell, Crawshaw, Bunton, & Green, 2001), but since then sociological debates on risk have moved to the margins of youth sociology. A wealth of empirical studies have continued to produce rich insights into young people’s engagement in specific practices such as alcohol consumption (e.g., Demant & Järvinen, 2006; Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2013; MacLean, Pennay, & Room, 2018; Zajdow & MacLean, 2014; Østergaard, 2009), drug use (Dahl & Sandberg, 2015; Hunt, Evans, & Kares, 2007; Measham, Parker, & Aldridge, 2001; Ravn, 2012), speeding and car culture (Balkmar & Joelsson, 2014; Best, 2006; Fynbo, 2014; Lumsden, 2008), and street-level violence (Bengtsson, 2012; Ravn, 2018), but they rarely situate this in a broader discussion of risk-taking in young people’s lives. This means that the academic discussion now seems to be primarily dominated by other disciplines such as psychology and behavioural economics, as discussed above. When risk is seen as a matter of rational calculations and trade-offs between short-term benefits and long-term costs, biological predispositions or individual psychological inclinations, the consequence is that the contexts surrounding young people’s risk-taking as well as their own experiences are ignored and dismissed. This is problematic because we as sociologists leave the processes of defining, understanding, and not least acting on young people’s ‘risky behaviours’ to these other disciplines, at the cost of not being able to take the complexity of everyday lives into account. With this book we want to ‘take back’ ‘risk-taking’ as an object of study and approach worth studying from a sociological perspective that situates risk-taking as practices in the broader context of young people’s everyday lives.

Youth and risk-taking

The research underlying this book explores young people’s engagements with a range of practices commonly seen as constituting risk-taking practices, such as alcohol and drug use, speeding, violence, steroid use, and petty crime. While not directly labelling this as ‘risk-taking’ in our contact with participants, we did pose questions about perceptions of risk and risk management strategies.
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It quickly became apparent that while the participants were keen to recount their experiences with, for example, criminal activity or cannabis use, they did not speak about this in terms of ‘risk-taking’. For many of them, notions of risk – at least in the simple sense of potential negative consequences of their engagement in the practices in focus – were more complex than this and not always seen as particularly relevant to their own everyday lives. Risk, or the idea of taking a chance and risking something, was for the young people in our studies rarely about the potential physical risks involved in practices, such as speeding in a car or taking drugs. For some, the illegality of a given practice could be of some concern, but for many the risks they envisioned had more to do with the social and structural context of such practices. The discussion of cannabis use in a focus group illustrates this:

ADAM: You have to be careful, it [cannabis] can easily become a taboo if you do it [smoke cannabis] too much. I mean, someone who is just smoking all the time and gets totally … weed addicted or whatever, and just needs weed all the time, that’s a bit of a taboo I think.
HJALTE: Yes, then it’s just too much, that type of –
ADAM: Exactly, too much, way too much! But lots of people, if you just do it, like, a Friday evening or Saturday evening or something like that, like, just hanging out and having one night dedicated to smoking, then –
HJALTE: Yes.
ADAM: – then it’s all good, that’s chill.

(Study 1)

For this group of young men in upper secondary education, cannabis use was not associated with physical or cognitive risks, but with the risk of being seen as “weed addicted”, if one is smoking too often. Worries about getting a ‘bad reputation’ were a concern that came to the fore over and over again. In addition to this focus on social risks, some participants would also speak about negative consequences of not smoking cannabis, in the sense that this was a way – although sometimes extreme – of being able to focus, stay calm, or manage difficult emotions. Further, while the pleasure from thrills and excitement was part of the data, this was not, as mentioned earlier, the dominant representation of the experience of engaging in the practices in focus. Rather, this was often seen as ordinary or part of the mundane, and as something that was heavily routinised. For instance, 17-year-old Michael told us in an interview how violence is a logical way of solving problems in his everyday life:

I don’t really do it anymore [fight and beat people up] but one of my friends is now a member of this support group [an ‘outlawed’ bikers’ group], so he has to do it. He wouldn’t hurt a fly, but if it bothered him he would smack it. So would I, you know … I know how to [defend myself] and if people piss me off, I show them who I am. It is quite simple, really.

(Study 2)
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As this quote illustrates, for Michael, engaging in violence was not seen as a risky practice that might hurt others or himself, or end up putting him in prison. Rather, risk was connected to others not respecting him by ‘pissing him off’, and the practice of violence was the ‘natural’ way for him to respond in situations where others made him uneasy.

In the data at large, ‘risk-taking practices’ as a category included practices that produced thrills, excitement, and fun as well as, more dominantly, socially embedded routinised practices seen as a natural part of everyday life or youth culture. Risk-taking practices appeared to interact with other practices in our participants’ lives and were bounded by varying perceptions of what would pose ‘a risk’. Such complex patterns of what is seen as constituting risk-taking and potential negative consequences of risky practices are what we are occupied with in this book.

Furlong and Cartmel emphasised the relevance of addressing risk as a central factor in young people’s lives (2007, p. 9). In their view, processes of individualisation and feelings of greater vulnerability have heightened young people’s awareness of risk and influenced their willingness to take risks such as smoking, drug use, and excessive alcohol use. However, as France (2000) has pointed out, this approach builds on a notion of risk-taking as ‘fact’ and ‘truth’, not a social construct, and may lead to a failure to explore the importance of risk-taking in the everyday lives of young people. We agree with this position of seeing risk-taking as a social construct, but also as a relational construct that we can only understand by focusing on why and how something is considered a risk in relation to other practices and in different contexts (see also Boholm & Corvellec, 2011; Douglas, 1986; Lupton, 1999; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003).

Researching youth and risk-taking: a few analytical and ethical reflections

The book is based on empirical data from two separate qualitative studies on young people’s engagement with risk-taking practices, for example, drug use, speeding, violence, and petty crime. Both studies were conducted in Denmark. The first study (Study 1) included 52 young people who were, for the most part, socially integrated and enrolled in upper secondary education. The second study (Study 2) included 18 young people who had been placed in out-of-home care when growing up and who attended different forms of education to varying degrees. Besides the differences springing from the various sampling procedures, the participants in the two studies also shared some characteristics: they were all 17–25 years of age and had experiences with what we defined as risk-taking practices, such as substance use, street level fighting, petty crime, or speeding. All quotations from interviews are translated from Danish. More information about the methods, sampling, and data for each of the two studies can be found in the Appendix.
For the purposes of this book we have pooled the data from the two studies, even though they were not at the outset designed as integrated or comparative studies. We do this because it provides us with a more diverse sample in terms of social backgrounds and life situations, which again allows us to explore and analyse different risk-taking practices and how the impact of risk-taking varies between different groups of young people (see also Dahl & Sandberg, 2015). However, this approach also poses some challenges. The two studies draw on different methodological approaches, which obviously produce diverse forms of knowledge that cannot be compared or contrasted without taking these differences into account. Being interviewed with a group of friends or on your own matters in terms of which aspects of risk-taking practices come to the fore. However, focus group interviews, as well as individual interviews, are useful methods for enabling young people to reflect upon practices that have become habitual or which are taken for granted, because they highlight interactional concerns of their risk-taking practices (see also Martens, 2012; Phoenix & Brannen, 2014). While individual interviews are often seen as less ‘tainted’ by the interview context than focus groups, we agree with Halkier & Jensen (2011), who, drawing on Atkinson & Coffey (2003), argue that all types of qualitative data, from participant observation through focus groups to interviews and diaries, should be viewed as ‘enactments’ or performances. The conversation in focus groups or individual interviews is thus itself ‘a practice’, with rules and conventions, and where the conversation is the activity of communicative interaction” (Martens, 2012, emphasis in original). In other words, focus group data are shaped by the interactional context, but so are individual interviews. It is just a different context. In the analyses we seek to include the relevant context when engaging with the data.

In the analyses, we draw on data from both studies to show how young people’s risk-taking practices unfold in a variety of everyday constellations. Because of the differences in design and methodologies, our approach is not that of a comparative analysis as such. Instead we use the two studies to complement and contrast with each other; to look for similarities as well as differences between the two samples. Our analyses are not exhaustive of our extensive empirical material but approach this material strategically, as exemplars of specific orientations, experiences, or situations. We believe that the benefits of a comprehensive analysis of risk-taking practices outweigh these limitations and it is our hope that the more explorative parts of our analyses will encourage further research.

It should be noted that our analyses are not exhaustive of the many everyday practices that make up young people’s lives and potentially affect risk-taking practices. Here we are in the hands of our data. For example, we would have liked to include how young people’s digital practices interact with their engagement in risk-taking practices (see for example Thomson, Berriman, & Bragg, 2018), but we do not have sufficient and systematic data on this dimension of our participants’ lives. We would also have welcomed more ethnically diverse samples but are limited to those who chose to participate in our research.
Finally, while aiming for a vast array of risk-taking experiences in the designs, cannabis use became the dominant experience in both studies. This means that in the analyses we devote significant attention to how cannabis is part of (different) young people’s lives. However, cannabis use, despite being the dominant practice, is not the only risk-taking practice in the participants’ everyday lives and we ensure that other risk-taking practices also feature when relevant.

Giving ‘voice’ to young people through research interviews and representing their experiences and understandings of their own lives are not neutral processes (see also Farrugia, 2016). While the involvement in a qualitative study such as ours is an ‘intervention’ into the participants’ lives (Thomson & Holland, 2003), it is also a process of definition and of sociological categorisation. By choosing to study young people’s risk-taking practices we have pre-defined that such practices exist, that they are relevant in young people’s lives, and that society in general is in need of (new) knowledge about such practices. We cannot avoid this, but we can at least acknowledge that these relations and categorisations are significant. While we have followed guidelines for ethical social research, we have not taken our final analyses back to our participants, because as stated by Thomson (2007, p. 580), “[r]eading a sociological account of the life that you are living is perhaps more than we might ask of a study participant”.

We cannot know in full why young people agreed to participate in our studies but it is clear that all of them wished to be recognised as morally worthy individuals and present ‘social realities’ important for their selfhoods and self-presentations (see also Farrugia, 2016). For some young people, the interview situation brought forth what Järvinen (2001, p. 280) has described as “moral tales, tales that tell us something about charges and defenses, pride and dishonor”. For others, the interview provided a chance to challenge adult (for example, parents) or societal (represented in, for example, legislation) presumptions and counter general attitudes towards their risk-taking practices, especially the use of cannabis, while for others again, the interview was considered an option to speak for those not heard. Regardless of the initial reason for participating in the research, the interviewees created their own discursive practices engaging with both the actual situation and the wider social situation of themselves as young people and us as adult researchers. In that sense, as researchers we are “embroiled within a complex system of moral worth arising from the intellectual politics of the academic field” (Farrugia, 2016, p. 155).

White, Wyn, and Robards (2017) remind us that concepts have a role in making the objects of the research, and Martens, Halkier, and Pink (2014, p. 7) emphasise that “as researchers we have to also always think about the ways in which the language we use, is itself organised by the practices and routines of thinking which we take for granted”. As such, our research is unquestionably formed by how we as sociologists choose theories and use words in ways that attempt to reflect the qualities of the social world of young people’s risk-taking practices that we are seeking to investigate. With this in mind, we believe in the value of advocating for practice-oriented approaches
in studies of young people’s engagement in risk-taking as these allow us to shift our focus from the individual to the social by emphasising the routinised and situational characteristics forming social practices.

**Structure of the book**

A condensed introduction to the Danish setting in which the empirical projects are conducted is presented in Chapter 2. Understanding the specific institutional setup as well as current trends in Danish society is important for understanding how specific youth cultural practices look as well as which support systems are in place for young people on the margins of society. In Chapter 3 we review the sociological literature on the concept of risk in general, with a particular focus on how this has been reflected in the sociology of youth. We draw on insights from this in Chapter 4 to present the theoretical framework that guides the empirical analyses in this book; a framework inspired by theories of practice.

In Chapter 5 we turn to the empirical analyses. In the first analytical chapter, we analyse how routinisation of risk-taking practices are a part of youth culture, more specifically showing how risk-taking practices interact with and are informed by youth cultural practices. In Chapter 6 we move on to analyse the coordination of everyday practices and what happens when risk-taking practices interact with and in some cases collide with everyday practices such as school or family. In Chapter 7 we analyse embodiment and how the body is central to risk-taking practices, and also how this body is a gendered body, engaging in various gendered risk-taking practices. Finally, in Chapter 8, we analyse how social context influences risk-taking practices by analysing how these are embedded in wider social structures and interact with young people’s transitions and broader processes of marginalisation. We sum up the main insights in Chapter 9, arguing that risk-taking is routinely made and re-made through concrete practices and consequently risks do not exist independently of social practices but become an integral part of young people’s everyday lives.

Overall, through extensive empirical analyses, the book explores how routinisation, coordination, embodiment, and social context are central aspects for understanding how, why, and when young engage in risk-taking practices.

**References**


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