

Risk Consciousness Among Japanese Youth

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日本人の若者間の「リスク」意識

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This paper describes research on Japanese young people and their ideas and perceptions of risk in the news and their daily lives. In order to better formulate possibilities for risk to be used as an organizing construct in university teaching and learning, it was necessary to first investigate what university students already know about risk. A survey was conducted with 288 university students in three different areas of Japan and six different universities. Interviews with a small sub-group were also conducted. Some comments suggest a paradoxical result that Japanese young people have some knowledge of risk but believe that others around them don't.

この論文は、日本人の若者を対象にニュース、及び、彼らの日常生活におけるリスクに対するアイデアと感覚についての研究論文である。大学教育での組織的構成概念として利用されるリスクをより明確可能にするため、最初に大学生たちがリスクについてすでに何を知っているのかを調査する必要があった。調査アンケートは、日本の3つの異なる地方の6つの大学から288人の大学生を対象に実施し、小さいグループによるインタビューも同時に行った。そのいくつかのコメントは、日本人の若者はリスク知識を持ち合わせているが、彼らのまわりの人々は持ち合わせないと信じている逆説的結果を示している。

Introduction to Risk in Japan

The proliferation of risk as a concept in social science necessitates some introductory remarks in order for the purpose of research to become more salient. While it is impossible to do justice to the widest range of work utilizing the sociological concept(s) of risk in the past decade in a paper of this length and still provide an overview of a particular research project in educational settings and issues related to risk as I will do here, I would still like to highlight some of the important starting points for a study of risk consciousness among Japanese 18 to 20 year olds.

In the next section I will summarize what I believe to be some of the important aspects of a sociology of risk, especially in relation to research in education, but I first want to highlight some of the notable characteristics of Japanese society in the past ten years or so which need to be put in the foreground of a discussion of risk and Japan.

While debates about the precise nature of Japanese modernity have been around for some years (see for example Vlastos, 1998), with some scholars suggesting that Japan somehow became

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a postmodern society before it ever became modern (Eisenstadt, 1996, p. 6, traces this debate), the ongoing hybridity of Japanese social and political forms has been remarked upon by many. This has been noted even as early as the mid-1930's by the famed Japanese ethnographer of culture, Yanagita Kunio:

Civilizational hybridity exists ...in Japan... When such circumstances are regarded with a cold eye from an external perspective [i.e. ethnographically], they will be deemed contradictory; in the reality of the daily life, however, people live [*kurashite ikiru*] in these circumstances all the time without any concern whatsoever. The countryside exists in the capital: all kinds of archaisms enter into and mix with the modern.

(Yanagita Kunio, cited in Harootunian, 1998, p. 153)

Whenever we turn to the "Japanese question," to borrow Kenneth Pyle's (1996) phrase in a slightly differing context, of how Japan relates to the rest of the world in issues of social change such as posited by risk society theory (Adam, Beck and Van Loon, 2000; Beck, 1992; 1999, 2000b), we need to acknowledge some of this ambiguity that has bedeviled analysis of Japan as a modern polity, but one that is often seen from the West as a prototypical 'Other,' modern but also traditional, hyper-capitalist but at the same time patriarchal and group-oriented. Here I can only allude to long debates regarding social science research on Japan as influenced either by Orientalism or *Nihonjin-ron* (literally theories of the Japanese), drawing attention to the way that Japan and the Japanese have been portrayed, and in many cases portray their own society, as unique.

Yet, while the totalizing aspect of transition in risk society theory to a 'second' or 'reflexive' modernity has been treated by many sociologists with skepticism, risk society theorists have been able to claim, at least cautiously, that something indeed has occurred globally with the rise of the possibility of catastrophic risk, symbolized by nuclear contamination, the worldwide transports of toxic wastes, and the rapid spread of new diseases like AIDS, SARS, BSE, and chicken flu. In *World Risk Society*, for example, Beck (1999) states that a "key question is how that model [of reflexive modernization] relates to the *different modernities* in other parts of the world" (p.2, italics in original). However with few exceptions, for example a contribution to a special issue in *Korea Journal* (Beck, 1998), he has had relatively little to say specifically about risk society in other parts of the world, except to claim that a kind of 'Brazilianization,' a condition in which some have stable and gainful full employment but the majority doesn't, is occurring throughout the world. This certainly lends credence to the often-made argument that Beck's focus is Euro- or even German-centric, and it is worth stating as a jumping off point for consideration of the possibility of analyzing Japan from the perspective of risk. Beck himself writes that the rejection of "radical otherness" is "an important standpoint in revising the evolutionary bias of much of the Western social sciences to this day." A dominant aspect developed in the context of analysis of

South Korea, for example, "might be an additive aspect in many parts of the West as well." There is a necessity, in short, "not only to include non-Western societies into any analysis of the challenges of the world risk society but also to examine the specificities of the local refractions of the global-local risks in these societies" (Beck, 1998, pp. 200-201).

Beck's lack of empirical substantiation in making this claim does not invalidate the possibility of finding 'fits' between the larger risk society theory and 'local' non-Western contexts. However we need to look to other sources to see how this would be the case, if indeed it is. A number of the chapters in the anthropologically oriented book *Risk Revisited* (Caplan, 2000) do, in fact, address questions in local non-Western contexts and understandings of risk as well as risk theory more generally. Nugent's (2000) portrayal of Amazonia as a risk-laden 'green hell,' is contrasted to a newer version of the same region as a repository of sustainable resources now in threat of being destroyed by the 'naïve' natives who must surely be stopped from plundering its resources before it is too late. Risk is thus "discovered" in the West in a global narrative that suggests certain relations of power that are only obliquely mentioned, if at all. "That risk should be elevated to the status of a defining feature of the age suggests ... the prospect that as the West finds it more difficult to displace its crises onto others, it begins to adopt the posture of the beleaguered, out of control in a manner previously assigned to inhabitants of the periphery" (p. 246). In a similar manner, Vera-Sanso (2000), argues that the focus on risk as somehow a successor to material needs (argued by Beck to be no longer of such importance in the affluent West) is off target. Risk in India is best perceived as "a concern for social status and maintaining social order" and should be oriented to a political explanation which investigates "the way dominant definitions of risk set moral codes which frame disciplinary regimes, constrain action and set the terms of debate in which people engage both to enforce and resist the impact of such definitions" (pp. 128-9).

How such disciplinary constraints and setting of the terms of debate relate to Japan then is a formidable question, as a nation with its own colonial past and globalizing tendencies in the current age but which also customarily cloaks its international political agenda in the shadow of the neo-hegemonic U.S., and whose citizens seem eager to develop consumer lifestyles (automobility, fast food, hip hop and pop music, and Hollywood movies, etc.) that are generally agreed by many Japanese to be benign (or at least inevitable) Americanization. In his 1994 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in literature, titled "Ambiguous Japan and Myself" [*Aimai na Nihon to Watashi*], Oe Kenzaburo reiterated the enduring problematic of a political (as well as social and cultural) identity for Japan, as part of Asia but looking toward the West, particularly the U.S.

As a result of this complex of problems of national and social identity, the Japanese response to the advent of risk, I argue, is likely to be one that is not only spectrally viewed from the ontological "uncertainty of self" (Tamamoto, 1999) expressed by many commentators, particularly in the recent 'lost' decade, but also one that is geo-politically quiescent in the main, despite the role that Japan has come to play as ally to the U.S. in the "war on terror."

Some theorizations about risk in Japan have suggested that it is nearly non-existent as an indigenous concept. Douglas (1992:14) argued, for example, that because no word exists in Japanese, and only recently has the katakana form of risk, *risiku*, made its way into common usage, that Japanese have been living, and perceived themselves as living, in a fundamentally risk-averse society. The result, based on her linkage of risk to political mobilization, is a claim that societal problems which involve phenomena based on risk perceptions and definitions in other societies can be solved in a much more straightforward manner in Japan, i.e. relying on the bureaucracy to sort things out, relegate blame, and impose its will. Clammer (2001:40) has argued in a similar manner that Japan has been "characterized by low levels of individualization," which, combined with the strong power of bureaucracies, means that solutions to or mobilizations around problems that might otherwise be labeled and politicized as risk do not often make their way into the public arena in Japan as such.

I argue, however, that in contradistinction to such claims, there is a budding discourse surrounding risk as mediated through the mass media with focus on issues such as nuclear accidents, BSE, SARS, and other technoscience problems. A problem to be resolved much less easily, however, is the degree to which such a consciousness leads to concrete action and change. In 2001, the first case of BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or Mad Cow Disease) was announced in a cow that had tested positive. The second and third cases were confirmed in November and December in different regions of Japan, while the fourth and fifth cases were confirmed in May of 2002. As of fall 2004, the number of confirmed cases in Japan is 15. In a secondary scandal, Snow Brand, a large food products company, was found to have mislabeled domestic beef as imported beef in January of 2001 in an attempt to gain subsidies for beef destined to be destroyed under precautionary measures taken by the Japanese government. The story was then complicated by the first discovery in 2003 of BSE in the U.S., a major exporter of beef to Japan, which subsequently banned imports of U.S. beef. Shortly before the remaining stocks of cheap American beef were consumed, TV cameras showed long lines of customers queuing in order to eat the last dishes of *gyudon*, a dish made from beef and rice, at a low-cost fast food chain. While many consumers have expressed anxiety over the quality of beef, many others wanted to get their last beef bowl before the ban went into effect. Currently the U.S. and Japanese governments have ongoing talks as each side maintains that it has 'science' on its side.

Other kinds of catastrophic risks are not necessarily new to Japan, however the exposure of the failure of the status quo management strategies makes them good examples of how risk has increasingly been exceeding its natural borders. In September 1999, Japan experienced its heretofore worst ever nuclear accident, in which 69 people were exposed to high levels of radiation, two workers were killed, and another was seriously injured. This was just one of a series of similar types of accidents and fires that have occurred at nuclear processing facilities and plants around Japan in recent years. What was different in this case was the discovery of a bootleg manual that instructed the workers how to make nuclear fuels by mixing uranium oxide with nitric acid using a

stainless steel container instead of by the usual mixing apparatus. Apparently this method was used as a way of cheapening the process and had been in use for several years. In summer of 2004, a new accident at a nuclear facility in Fukui claimed the lives of 4 workers as pipes which had badly deteriorated after 28 years of use exploded with boiling water. Once again the ritualized scene of government officials bowing in public and claiming responsibility was broadcast on Japanese TV, but it seems clear that fewer and fewer Japanese people find such public displays trustworthy indicators of institutional responsibility.

One may argue, certainly, that such incipient risk consciousness is relatively new in Japan. I would suggest a strong generational divide as a component to such a consciousness, but such a divide is only intuitive at this stage. The first goal of research on risk consciousness is to ascertain that risk is something perceived even if often viewed through multiple lenses.

Thus, research which investigates the consciousness of risk in Japan must be able to look at two seemingly contradictory dimensions; first, a normative emphasis on risk which has been relatively muted and constrained by reliance on strong administrative political mechanisms, symbolized by powerful government Ministries (e.g. the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology or *Monbukagakushou*). And second, a growing emphasis on exposure of and to risk, related in the media, and portraying the government and bureaucrats, and corporate representatives, as jeopardizing public health and welfare, even to the point of nearly deliberate indifference to public safety, as the case of mixing uranium in buckets illustrates. In the next section I quickly review some of the general characteristics of a sociology of risk in order to describe the research that I undertook with Japanese university students. These characteristics are an attempt to focus on some current level of understanding about risk but also to address risk a little more specifically from the standpoint of a sociology of education.

Risk Defined

This research started from the premise that risk is indeed an operative concept in the consciousness of young people in Japan. Japanese youth embrace risk more than an earlier generation and they also have knowledge about some of the phenomena that I defined as risk in the section above, such as BSE and nuclear energy, as well as SARS, AIDS, the war on terrorism and so on. While these phenomena certainly have a 'real' component to them, in that they are capable of causing individuals great harm, they also depend for their power on the amplification which they receive in the media. The question of how media mediate risk is one that has been undertheorized in Beck's work, as critiqued by a range of recent authors (Boyne, 2003; Mythen, 2004, Van Loon, 2002) which it is impossible for me to cover in any depth here. However, it is important to note that media portrayal of risk is not as straightforward as might first appear. Mythen's (2004) discussion, in particular, of media reliance on government and institutionalized scientist sources, as well as the political economy of media, is important in illustrating the difficulties of bringing popular attention to a particular issue which in turn helps to shape risk perception. Van Loon (2002)

makes the strongest case for the virtual mediation of images of risk, which he calls a "crisis of actualization" (p. 155) noting, only that which gets our attention is "panic ecology" (p. 163). Boyne uses the phrase "emotional spectacularization" (p. 40). Media capitalizes on the "tension [which] is between analysing risk and creating an appetite for its images" (p.35).

Media in Japan are, as many other countries, dependent on the short attention spans of audiences. From my many years of teaching, it has longed surprised me how few Japanese university students profess to reading a newspaper, watching the news on television, or accessing a news site through the internet. This certainly has a bearing on how risk can and should be defined in order to operationalize research on perceptions about it. While university students were a target of opportunity, I also hypothesized that, among the larger population of Japanese youth, they would tend to have higher interest in issues defined as risk. In the research outlined below I attempt to first generalize about risk and then describe how I presented an overview to frame the questions that I subsequently asked students.

What do we mean generally then by risk? First, risk is about the staging of the future. Future developments are used to determine present action. Crises and potentially negative outcomes, both calculable and incalculable are mobilized as sources of stimulus to action. In the phrasing of Beck (1999:52), "The calculus of risks ... promise the impossible: future events that have not yet occurred become the object of current action."

The power in the staging of the future as Beck writes about it is a wedge to keep institutional participants from pausing to reflect.

Believed risks are the whip used to keep the present day moving along at a gallop. The more threatening the shadows that fall on the present day from a terrible future looming in the distance, the more compelling the shock that can be provoked by dramatizing risk today.

(Beck, 1999, p. 137)

Second, risk has both a macro and a micro component. In order to understand both the macro and micro perspectives of risk however it is necessary to meld streams of thought that do not easily fit with each other; namely to complement the risk society work of Beck (1992; 1999; 2000) Giddens (1990; 1991; 2000), and others, with the work on governmentality derived from Foucault (1991) and pursued more recently by Rose (1996; 1999), Dean (1999a and b), and in education, especially, Popkewitz (1998; 2000). It remains one of the challenges of social science to see if these alternative approaches to utilizing the risk concept can be brought together and whether the macro level of social theory as discursively expounded in the hypothesis that risk is one of the central concepts of the present can be located in ethnographic work done in educational settings. This is to necessarily truncate a good deal of complexity in both the strengths and weaknesses of each of these approaches. Furthermore we should be suspicious, as Rose (1999, p. 5) points out of the macro-micro distinction in the first place, and typified by Foucault's work with the multiplex

concept of governmentality, succinctly defined by Rose as “specific strategies, techniques and practices for the conduct of conduct” (p. 7). Mythen (2004) has devoted a long critique to the lack of focus on the micro in the work of Beck, while being equally critical, however, of the governmental approach.

Third, while the terminology of risk implies loss and damage, one of the first issues that should be addressed is the degree to which risk can be theorized as a *productive* element in the array of techniques for creating students who are capable and eager to make themselves flexible to fit the changing nature of work trajectories in the 21st century political economy. Rose (1996) has written about the entrepreneurial self, the use of psychology, or as he puts it the “psy” sciences, in helping bring to the fore the desired characteristics of flexibility, resourcefulness, and autonomy. Similarly although he phrases it in skeptical terms such as “biographization,” or creation of a “do-it-yourself,” elective, tightrope, breakdown, or risk biography (1999, p. 12), Beck suggests that there is a productive capacity of risk to help structure the way individuals come to know themselves and their possible futures, what he terms “insitutionalized individualism” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). However for Beck, it should be noted, this results in reflexivity, or through a mobilization in what he terms sub-politics, one of the more critiqued aspects of his work. Other work has focused on “embracing risk” (Baker and Simon, 2002) and certainly on an individual level, room has to be made for understanding how certain risks are accepted and others are not, even when the lesser possibility of harm and occurrence might favor the more shunned risks.

Fourth, sociologists of education have long recognized and researched the role of institutional education in helping to shape acceptance of expectations that ‘fit’ with one’s background, as in the well known work on social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Willis, 1977). While class has not ceased to be an important variable in looking at the sociology of education, there is more emphasis in recent work on the way in which individuals are trained and molded by the expectations that they must develop multiple capacities or competencies. Certainly the expectations are differentially circumscribed, but they also are inscribed by the illusive overlay of choice and autonomy. To oversimplify greatly, one might be tempted to suggest that in the educational present, *reproduction meets risk*. Several recent studies of youth in Europe have focused on these same themes. A study of unemployed young people in the city of Leipzig of the former East Germany, which has a significantly higher unemployment than the former West Germany (Evans, et.al., 2001, p. 137), concluded that “risk is perceived as operating at the individual level.”

The differentiation of risk consciousness between individuals and groups is made even clearer in Furlong and Cartmel’s (1997) study of British youth. Even as individual responses to changing employment risk and uncertainty are seen by youth as a matter of personal volition, their choices are greatly structured by class considerations or “risk divides,” insecurity for some, tradable skills for others (also Allen and Henry, 1997; Ekinsmyth, 1999). In a similar way, Gee (2000) defines “portfolio people” as youth who must attempt to place themselves strategically in what is variously described as the new work order, fast capitalism, or the information economy.

Fifth and finally, risk may lead to reflexivity. This is a complex discussion with various claims on both sides as an issue/site/event is subject to “plural rationality claims” in competition with each other regarding questions such as who has the right to make authoritative diagnoses about the kinds of unintended and unforeseeable consequences resulting from particular pathways of risks. It is not simply a question of experts vs. lay publics, but a question of a particular risk’s side effects being great enough either in its potential consequences or in numbers of people affected and thus leading to heightened awareness and efforts to reform the institutions that are unable to control the risks internally. Strydom (2002) introduces the concept of the “experimenting society” to try to account for how technological societies multiply risks at the same time as attempt to foster certain cognitive stances that support such risk-taking.

Sociological Theories of Risk

It now is commonplace then to link risk to a wide variety of phenomena in society and the ever increasing amount of social science literature on risk can be taken as exemplary of the ways in which risk has come to be seen as a key heuristic in the understanding of social change. If one tracks as a starting point the publication by Ulrich Beck of *Risikogesellschaft* in the original German edition in 1986, and published in English in 1992 (See also Adam, Beck and van Loon: 2000; Beck: 1999, 2000a and b; Giddens: 1990, 1991, 2000 and Lupton: 1999) risk has been an important theme for approximately two decades. It can be argued that this lineage extends even further if one includes the seminal work of Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), which challenged the normative basis of risk analysis of the era as being committed to objectivity and capable of full explanation and disclosure. Empirical work extending this analytic framework to such diverse fields as social welfare (Culpitt, 1999; Taylor-Gooby, 2000), youth and social change (Ecclestone and Field: 2003; Evans, Behrens, and Kaluza, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Powell and Edwards, 2003), professionalization in labor (Allen and Henry, 1997; Ekinsmyth, 1999) politics (Franklin, 1997) and the police (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997) has shown the utility and productivity of the framework for a variety of changing institutions and issues.

Work relating risk to education has focused prominently on the category of “at-risk” learners and groups but some authors have (Ecclestone and Field: 2003; Robertson, 1999; Quicke, 2001) presented a broader discussion of risk related to changes in advanced societies in employment, individualization critique changing models of education encapsulated in the notions of competition and accountability. More importantly, in my estimation, there have been a number of recent publications in the past two years (Strydom: 2002; Tulloch: 2004; Tulloch and Lupton: 2003; Van Loon 2002) that have extended the theoretical discussions of risk and risk society beyond the now well-rehearsed critiques of Beck’s (1992) original work or even modifications in his later work (Beck 1999, 2000b).

Still it is not at all clear that the theoretical trajectories of much of the work on risk follow the same arc. That is to say, there is plenty of disagreement and much to be explained through empiri-

cal research. To raise but one example, a certain line of argument has been advanced that societal focus on risk has created overwhelming fear of the unknowable and leads to risk aversion strategies (Furedi: 2002). While this certainly explains some aspects of social risk perception as exhibited in the extreme damage that falls on localized tourism industries when cases of new diseases like SARS are announced, it does little to explain the continued drive for experimentation that characterizes new technology or technoscience more generally (Helen: 2004). Similarly, risk can be a strong inhibitor to certain kinds of actions but encourages experimentation even among the same individuals depending on factors that need to be contextualized by careful research and explanatory models. What is research about risk and everyday life (Tulloch and Lupton: 2003) able to tell us that will help elucidate further understanding of the theories of risk?

In this paper, I will describe the preliminary results of an ongoing research that I conducted in 2003-4 on Japanese university students and knowledge of risk. The origin of this project was a desire to complement work that I did several years earlier in interviewing university teachers of English about their conceptions and beliefs regarding computer use. I wanted to focus on how risk is perceived by young people in Japan partly because, in contrast to the claim that risk aversion is the dominant relation to risk in Japanese society, I had seen many examples of Japanese youth 'embracing risk' (Baker and Simon: 2002) and partly because I wanted to compensate an earlier bias in my study of technology and risk on the agents of change (i.e. the teachers) vs. the objects of that change (i.e. the students).

What I hadn't envisioned as this research commenced was that in choosing to emphasize risk in my teaching of several classes of sophomore English reading and writing I was also opening up a possibility for creating alternative responses to the effects of English and computers on the curriculum in Japanese universities. While the full implications and possibilities of such responses are not described in this paper, it would be easy to gloss them under the terminology of developing critical media literacy (Semali: 2000). However in contradistinction to how some authors have used this term, I think that an emphasis on risk provides students a way of bringing together the disparate phenomena that they read about in the news such as SARS, BSE and mad cow disease, chicken flu, nuclear energy and weapons of mass destruction, genetically modified organisms and biotechnology, cloning and so on. Such a focus also pinpoints the different 'modes of knowledge' that have been identified as essential for a better understanding of risk; 1) Everyday experience, 2) Science-driven scenarios and 3) Collective narratives, which are increasingly media-driven (Boholm, 2002:173).

It is with respect to the ability to understand analyze and critique collective narratives as mediated through the mass media (i.e. newspapers, television, and the internet) that an education of risk has the most to offer, although we shouldn't assume that knowledge in modes 1 and 2 are not important as well. How it is that risk has become so central to mass media is a question that continues to need further exploration although some advances in our understanding have been made in recent work and it is to that which I will now turn.

In *Risk, Environment and Society*, Strydom (2002) advances an argument for a cognitive sociology and, drawing on Habermas, proposes a “discursive democratic dispensation” as a vital component for addressing both intentional and unintentional societal risks brought forth by technoscience. A cognitive approach calls attention to public communication and discourse “to critically puncture across the board illusionary projections” (p. 166) of scientific knowledge cloaked in certainty, and policy and administrative measures which veer out of control in so many democratic and technologically advanced societies.

Such a project “compel[s] social scientists to give more focused attention to modes of perception, modes of framing, cognitive structures, and collective processing of cultural models of reality” (p. 152). This focus is in direct response to the emergence of what Strydom calls the “experimenting society,” in which hypotheses, experiments, risks and so on are no longer confined to the laboratory but have come to be “motivated and impelled by curiosity, power, wealth, commodification, privilege and ... experimentally implemented in society as laboratory yet in an arrogant manner deriving from its absolutist core of state power structure ... [government] insists ... is self-contained and [it is] not responsible for any social consequences” (p. 104).

Van Loon (2002) similarly writes of the necessity to go beyond critique of risks and see them at the very center of “the development of particular technoscience projects.” Certain risks are able to gain prominence and, riding on the lexicon of moral panic, “replicate themselves almost infinitely and instantaneously, merely appropriating the media technologies that set them into work in the first place” (p. 172). The silence of those who become objectified in risk event narratives, i.e. victims, is contrasted to “an exuberance of voyeurism by media apparatuses” which utilize pre-existing normative cognitive structures for framing those events, structures which are more often than not tied to interests of government, science, and hierarchical power relations.

Van Loon does caution us, however, about the excess of risk in media and elsewhere. “Nowadays it is not uncommon for people to feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information about risks in their everyday lives ... Combined with a growing force of individualization, in which more and more essential decisions are thrown back onto individual responsibility, it becomes difficult to develop rational strategies for dealing with risk. If everything is risk, then risk loses its appeal to sensibility” (p. 188).

Taken together then these authors suggest a focus on risk that 1) should aim to explore the cognitive structures groups of people (e.g. teachers and students) use to frame risk; 2) how they come to modify their views through knowledge, interest, and education; and 3) how media can be both analyzed and utilized for deconstructing and reconstructing understandings of risk.

Researching Risk Consciousness Among Japanese University Youth

Japanese universities have in the past decade discovered new sources of risk to their own futures. As in higher education systems in most countries around the world, there has been a steady growth in the percentages of young people who attend some form of tertiary education. In

this respect, Japan is no exception as the percentage of 18 year-olds entering higher education has increased from roughly 38 per cent in 1990 to currently nearly 50 per cent (McVeigh, 2002, p. 70). However as the birth rate is one of the lowest in the world, the overall numbers of students have been falling for some years now and will continue to drop to an estimated 1.2 million in 2009. University faculty are tasked with goals of preparing for the future which includes making the university more attractive and useful to the students in multiple ways. Successful employment statistics of graduates are used to match and compare faculties and universities as a whole. Universities are encouraged to push students to look for permanent employment as opposed to casual employment that some are interested in as a time-marker before deciding their next big move after graduation.

Luhmann, writing in a different context shows how the future is used a disciplinary mechanism for present action.

We incessantly search for decisions, be they political decisions with which we counter this problem, or evade it, or in any case try to neutralize or delay it. We define as a risk not doing something that could possibly help. It would be inconceivable, even irresponsible, to not try what is possible, if only to redistribute the risk. Nothing speaks against it and everything for it.

(Luhmann, 1993, p. 74)

And so it is with university management down to the micromanagement of the stated purposes for teaching and learning. If it doesn't help the students' future, which in turn is a credit to the institution since universities are so heavily involved in the seeking and procurement of jobs for their students, then it may not be worth investing time and resources on developing. From this it follows that English and information technology (IT) should be taught as much as possible and used to show the university providing relevant education to sell to students, employers, and Japanese society. In this context, risk appears as a construct which can be utilized to invert some of the implications of a restructured university linked to employment and training needs of industry. Starting from the individualization of risk, the fear of not being able to find gainful and permanent employment, consciousness of larger social issues is at least a possible outcome.

From such a background, I designed the research in summer of 2003 (undertaken in the winter of 2003-4) as a combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews (288 and 10 respectively). The sites were six different universities, two of which I teach in, and four others in which I was able to ask colleagues to let me join their classes to conduct the research in the course of approximately half (45-50 minutes) of a normal 90-minute class period. Two of the universities were public, four were private, two located in Kanto (which, including Tokyo, is the largest metropolitan area in Japan), three in Kansai (the second largest metropolitan area), and one in a smaller city between these two regions. The two public universities were both medical universities, while

the private university students were all in various faculties of liberal arts. The size of the samples varies greatly from one institution to the next with normal classes in the medical universities being approximately 50 students and the smallest of the private university samples being 16 students in a class. All of the classes were English classes, so the research was done entirely in English, unless students asked for translation of terms, such as BSE or nuclear energy, which they were given individually.

The research was introduced with a short article from an English newspaper in the summer of 2003 which described the damage to the Taiwanese economy from the loss of tourists due to the outbreak of SARS. Students were given some leading questions to help them understand how hotel owners suddenly found themselves losing money due to the spread of a new disease and mass media amplification of the risks of contact. They were also asked to think about who might potentially profit from the risk of SARS (facial mask makers, scientific researchers and pharmaceutical companies testing new vaccines, etc.) to suggest that risk is not simply about damage, potential and actualized, but also opportunity.

The questionnaire that followed consisted of four factual questions (gender, age, how often the respondent reads the news, and population of city/town of residence), 24 questions on a 4-point scale regarding knowledge and opinions of risks, and four open-ended comment questions on risk. In addition to the questionnaires, a small number of students (10) were interviewed (tape-recorded and transcribed) and asked about risk in a semi-structured interview format that averaged about 15-20 minutes each.

Preliminary Findings

While the analysis of the results of the questionnaires is ongoing, some preliminary findings were notable. Of a total of 288 respondents, 176 (or 61%) said that they read the news every day or once every two or three days. 63 (21%) said they read the news less than once a week.

Issues which students knew the most about were in the following order (including both know a lot and know something about); Global warming (94%), AIDS (90%), Mad Cow Disease (83%), the War on terrorism (77%), SARS (69%), Nuclear energy (66%), Genetically modified food (62%), and Computer viruses (38%).

84% of the respondents claimed to be either interested a lot or some in national and international news. This finding taken together with the attribution that 61% of the students read the news at least several times a week was greater than I had expected. However, in answer to the question of whether they talk about the news with their friends, only 35% responded a lot or some, 46% responded not very much, and 18% responded not at all (see Appendix 2). This indicates that these Japanese young people have interest in the news but view it from a distance or at least don't exchange opinions about it with friends. More optimistically, however, a full 97% agreed strongly or agreed that students should learn about national and international news. Those interested in politics and the economy a lot or some accounted for 49% while those interested in society and

social changes accounted for slightly more at 62%.

In respect to three issues, food safety, mad cow disease, and nuclear energy, which I decided to highlight further by asking questions about students' trust in experts, nuclear energy fared the worst with 61% either worried or distrusting of the government, while 47% and 29% had the same to say about food safety and eating beef respectively.

In relation to personal risk-taking, 66% claimed that they only occasionally take risks or not at all. On the other hand when asked about extreme sports, such as parachuting and bungee jumping, 41% said they would like to try them and another 40% said they were OK although they didn't want to try them personally. We can surmise that risk-taking can be defined in many ways so results such as these make it hard to pinpoint the degree of risk that individuals will accept. As a general rule, however, it seems that opportunistic risk-taking within a general comportment of not taking too many risks is the norm for these Japanese youth. For more specific information we need to turn to some of the comments in interviews and on the open-ended questions.

In the interviews, one of the most striking results was the statement of a majority that they are interested in risk but their friends are not. One female student responded to the question of risk-taking in the following manner. "I take them. I don't want to all the time, but if I take a risk, I can learn something from the risk." But she claimed that many of her friends "don't like adventures." Another male student said that unlike himself, "I think that Japanese people only care about themselves and are not interested in social issues." Another male student stated, "I think the Japanese teenagers don't really think about risk, there's a war in Iraq so that made teenagers recognize the word risk. It might happen in Japan too. People are starting to understand." Finally a female commented, "personally I'm interested in that but many friends around me are not interested in international issues of Japanese government's actions...it is not clear what kind of problem we will have in future. Japanese government doesn't open the information of our society in future ...government doesn't give me the information I want."

Written statements in the open-ended questions were also collated and coded (some of which appear in Appendix 1). In general most of these comments were positive about the importance of understanding risk. This makes intuitive sense because if one were not interested, it is unlikely that he or she would bother to write a comment after already filling in the answers to previous questions. There was some disagreement as to whether most young people were not interested (27.1, 25.7), or had interest but no knowledge (27.2), or knew more than they actually said but wrote "not much" knowledge because of the difficulty of getting reliable information. Here again, an aspect of what kind of knowledge of risk 'counts' is an open question. Many respondents seem to suggest that have interest and knowledge while others don't, or don't have enough, or don't know that they know.

Another finding worth noting was the mention of the Iraq war as a trigger for interest in risk among some young people (25.4, 26.2). However, there was also one respondent (26.2) who claimed that he/she had tried to get more people interested in the impending war without success.

Finally, strong opinions were expressed (25.1, 25.2, 25.8, 25.9) that the government was not giving people reliable and useful information. "Risks are covered by Japanese government," as one respondent put it. People are not as easily satisfied by the admission of failure on the part of government bureaucrats and a public apology including bowing for the cameras.

Conclusion

One practical outcome of this research was a teaching component that I developed for several of my classes focusing on the topic of risk in the media. This involved exposing students to a variety of topics in a classroom equipped with internet and students subsequently teaching each other about particular risk issues and events. Much attention has been paid in Japanese higher education in recent years to technologies of computer education and a narrowly defined literacy in English (i.e. as measured by TOEFL or TOEIC test scores). An alternative use of these domains of education can mobilize students to consider the cognitive social functions of discursive risk structuring in the media. Computing skills and English language learning have nothing fixed about them that prevent them from being utilized to promote a type of critical media literacy that calls attention to the way in which educational futures and risk are revealed to students and teachers as givens, givens which like the threat of being left behind in the information age or going low-tech, or of not achieving a high score on the TOEFL or TOEIC, can be challenged as not fully transparent about the interests of policy makers and corporate leaders.

A critical education in the English classroom can use computers and media to help students understand the world they live in and give them the tools to become more cognizant of how risk is communicated through important social issues. This is not a remarkable plan for creating a different or revitalized kind of action to change politics from the bottom up so much as it is a first step to giving students the ability to see for themselves the effects of the experimenting society and how it is being constructed by powerful vested interests.

More generally, however, at least two divergent scenarios are possible to picture based on the results in this research. One is that risk becomes further normalized through media representation. Lash (2002) writes about this as network society putting back into order the 'disorganized capitalism' that spawned risk. The network society "re-stabilizes the risks of Beck's (1992) risk society partly by calculatively colonizing - through for example futures markets - the future" (p. 127). While personally skeptical about the use of another shorthand to universally describe 'society,' I think Lash points to the possibility for ordinary citizens to become 'arbitrageurs' of risk, personally accepting those they feel comfortable with and can profit from/with while rejecting those that they fear or dislike. This seemed to be partly indicated by some of the results of this research in which many students saw themselves as interested in risk in contrast to other students around them. Such a relation to risk most closely resembles what Crook (1999) calls a "neo-liberal risk management regime," one in which management is largely dependent on "self-regulating capacities of individuals." Or perhaps we could add knowledgeable and enterprising individuals. As

such, the “neo-liberal risk management constantly threatens to de-legitimize itself because it delivers the risk without the management” (p. 181).

The second scenario is that through risk consciousness, young people in Japan would become more interested in social issues, advocacy, and change. This would correspond to the hope of analysts such as Strydom (2002), who argues that the realization that we now live in experimenting societies can be the impetus to new social and political formations. But in order for that to happen, a much deeper questioning of the link between capitalism and technoscience needs to take place, one in which the entrepreneurial fixes to risk are challenged as “a new form of class conflict.” Among the university students I researched, there is little evidence that such views on risk are either developing or even on the distant horizon.

This would be too pessimistic a conclusion however. The strong interest in risk communication expressed by many of the students in this research attests to the lively possibilities for future teaching and research utilizing risk(s) as thematic content. In the longer term, such education does offer the possibility of challenging neo-liberal self-destructive policies toward the environment and individualized consumptive lifestyles that are ascendant in many societies including Japan.

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Appendix 1

Data from Student Surveys

Answers are numbered according to the survey question and the number of the respondent for the question. Key heuristic labels are in the parentheses below the statement.

On the following lines, please write your comments about whether you think it's important to understand risk in the current society in Japan:

25.1) I think it's important to understand risk in our society. There is much more risk than we have thought. If we don't care about them at all and trust (for example) government completely, we will have big damage when some wrong things happen.

(understanding, government)

25.2) There are many risks in our society, but the government gives us little information, I think. Of course we should get more information ourselves but it is [a] regrettable fact that we are interested in such risks not very much.

(government, interest)

25.3) I think it is important to understand risk in the current society in Japan. This is because we are living in Japan and if something happens we might have to take responsibilities. So I think it is important to understand the risks.

(understanding, responsibility)

25.4) It is very important to understand risks in the current society and people especially young people are not that concerned about the risks or even the current situation of Japanese society. I am quite worried about it as it might be too late to realize the risks are in front of yourself. Like in [the] Iraq wars.

(responsibility, global)

25.5) I think it's very important to understand risk. It is becoming more and more convenient, but at the same time, there would be more and more risks. We have to find information really useful to us from overflowing information.

(understanding)

25.6) It is important to understand what means 'risk.' In our daily life we have some kinds of risks. But many of us do not know that we now face many problems – self-defense, international problems, domestic problems. We should notice these problems and risks, I think.

(understanding, everyday risk)

25.7) Many people do not understand risk because they do not think it is important to understand risk. I think it is necessary to understand risk.

(understanding)

25.8) There are a lot of risks in the current society of Japan. But the risks are covered by Japanese government. So, we should think about the risks for ourselves.

(responsibility, government)

25.9) I think it is important. There are a lot of risks today. We have to decide by ourselves.

Government is not always reliable. So we have to know what is going on in the world and what we should do.

(responsibility, government)

On the following lines, please write your comments about how you take or avoid risks in your individual life:

26.1) I usually do not take risks in my individual life. Taking risks sometimes gives us good results but it can be dangerous. Since I don not like taking responsibility, I don't like taking risks.

(everyday risk, responsibility)

26.2) It depends on the things but there are too little things that I can deal about. The risks are so big that one person cannot do anything about it and it is very difficult to get the attention about it as people in [the] surrounding usually don't care about the big issue. The personal problems/risks can be dealt with but thing like taxes, employment rate, war on Iraq, etc. I have no idea what I can do about it (Actually I tried to get people's attention about Iraq but wasn't successful ...).

(responsibility, everyday risk, global)

On the following lines, please write your comments about any of the topics in this survey that you are especially interested in:

28.1) I'm interested in most of these topics. It is because most of [the] topics have another aspect. For example, global warming is the problem that rose temperature of the earth. But it caused another problem. Global warming cause disasters by climate change. And this disaster occurred in almost [only] developing countries. And global warming finally caused [an] economic gap between developed and developing countries.

(interest, global)

On the following lines, please write your comments about whether you think young Japanese people know a lot about these topics:

27.2) I do not think so. Young Japanese people – including me – do not have informations or knowledge about these topics. But I and some of them are interested in these topics.

(knowledge, interest)

A.1) I guess many students [write] a lot of “some” or “not very much.” This is because they think ‘we can get more information if we make effort[s], but we do not,’ so they don’t choose “a lot.” However I think they know more about thinking than they think themselves.

(knowledge)

27.1) I think young Japanese people are only interested in themselves and don’t care about those issues. As long as they don’t bother them. In others words, young Japanese tend to be interested in nothing.

(interest)

Appendix 2: Interest in News

Q. 9 I’m interested in national and international news:

A Lot	Some	Not Very Much	Not at All	No Answer
25%	58%	14%	3%	0%

Q. 13 I think it is important that students learn about national and international news:

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No Answer
52%	44%	2%	0.3%	1%

Q. 12 I and my friends talk about national and international news:

A Lot	Some	Not Very Much	Not at All	No Answer
5%	30%	46%	18%	1%

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