The role of risk in the identity work of young people

A conversation on preliminary findings from an ethnographic study

Lauren Graham

PhD candidate

Centre for Social Development in Africa & Department of Sociology

University of Johannesburg

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Contents

1. Introduction

The impetus for this study emerged out of a conversation held in an elevator between a passionate researcher contemplating the thought of a doctoral degree after a rather traumatic Masters experience (that's me) and the (then) Director of South Africa's largest youth focused HIV prevention campaign – loveLife (that's Dr David Harrison). In that conversation Dr Harrison pointed out how the results emerging from the HIV prevalence survey conducted by the HSRC (published later as Shisana et al. 2009) demonstrated that sexually active young girls up to the age of 16 were able to effectively negotiate condom use but that after that age condom use dropped off significantly. He had statistically eliminated the desire to become pregnant as one causal factor and so we wondered together what the reason might be. I knew (from the Masters experience) that I had to have a research question that would sustain my interest for at least (and at most) three years and in that moment I knew I'd stumbled upon it.

And thus began the exciting journey towards understanding the role that risk plays in young people's identity work. At this point I am actually still collecting the last of my data and the process of analysis has thus far been relatively limited due to my energies being focused on data collection. Nevertheless I do think there are some interesting themes emerging that I would like to share in this seminar paper today. I must stress that these are early issues that seem to be developing into thematic patterns, but without further analysis they are very much preliminary – hence my request that what is shared in this forum not be circulated or cited yet.

In this paper I deal with the research design and methodology employed and will spend a short time reflecting on lessons we[1] have learned about conducting research with young people. I then move on to briefly outline how I have conceptualised the notions of risk and identity work before moving into three themes that I have seen emerge in my initial analysis of the data. I do not draw out any implications or recommendations in this paper precisely because of the tentative nature of the findings thus far.

2. Conceptualising risk

Much of the work on risk amongst youth has focused on their risk behaviour in relation to sexual activity (see for instance amongst others Castro-Vasquez, 2000; MacPhail & Campbell, 2001; Hunter, 2002; Kuate-Defoe, 2004; Sorrell & Rafaelli, 2005; Dupas, 2006), involvement in crime and violence

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[1] 'We' refers to Memory Mphaphuli and I. Although the findings presented in this paper are drawn from my own work, the conversations that we have had over the course of the research have informed our thinking about the themes as well as the process of conducting research with young people and I want to acknowledge that with the use of "we". Memory is currently working on her MA research project and although she asks a different research question she will be drawing on some of the data we have collected as a team.

(see for instance Farmer et al., 2003; Muntingh, 2005; Ward, 2007; Bruce, 2007; Pelser, 2008) and substance use and abuse (see for instance Hingson et al. 2005; Bauman et al. 2007; Borsari, 2007; Draus & Carlson, 2009). The work is often aimed at identifying some of the causes for high risk behaviour in order to make programmatic recommendations for behaviour change.

However, as Campbell & MacPhail (2002) argue, work that has focused on knowledge, attitudes and practice, whilst being able to note what knowledge and attitudes are good in relation to risk behaviour, has little power to predict actions of individuals. Instead notions of identity, belonging to particular social networks and the associated norms and values that an individual internalises as part of that process must be understood if we are to understand why people engage in risk behaviour.

As such I approached this study with a broader notion of risk than traditional risk behaviour research has done. Although I agree with many of the findings generated by those working in the fields of vulnerability to risk and risk resilience I decided to view risk from the perspective of it playing a role in identity work for young people. In this conceptualisation I draw on two broad schools of thinking on risk.

2.1. The risk society and individualisation

The first is the work of Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) who theorise how risks can be 'manufactured' at the individual level through a process of individualisation or institutionalised individualism, processes that are inherent in modernity and linked with the concept of reflexive modernisation (Zinn 2008). The importance of this conceptualisation lies in the idea that notions of risk are embedded in what they terms *selfhood*. A description of the process of individualisation will outline how risk and identity are linked in their thinking.

According to Beck & Beck-Gersheim (2002) the process of individualisation occurs in three stages. Firstly people move away from or are liberated from the social norms and commitments that they had previously ascribed to. This happens as a process of questioning commonly held values and traditions. Zinn (2008) gives the example of how feminism has challenged traditionally held gender norms and values. Hand in hand with this challenging of norms and values goes a weakening of traditional modes of support. As a result established ways of doing things are replaced by a process of decision making and greater agency for individuals. In this process there comes to be a greater emphasis placed on individual autonomy and the 'self-made man' – the idea that one's own future is up for determining and is not shaped by anything but our own decisions. This in the second stage leads to a loss of stability similar to what Durkheim would have termed anomie. The third phase is a process of reintegration into new societal institutions, importantly for Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, the

welfare state and the market. They argue that both of these modern institutions foreground the importance of the individual - the market because it relies on individual rational decision making and individual principles of consumerism, and the welfare state since it places onus on the individual to ensure that the welfare state's protection is only temporary. However, they argue that despite this discourse of individual autonomy, individuals are profoundly subjected to these systems. Individuals are in fact increasingly controlled and dependant on either the welfare (or developmental in the case of South Africa) state or the market or both since they cannot survive well outside of these, and since these to a large extent determine notions of what the individual aspires to. According to Zinn (2008: 33)

> This takes place in a world where the norms of autonomous decisions making and shaping one's own life course and identities spread. Even where no decisions are made because of a lack of alternatives or resources, the individual has to pay for the decisions not taken.

So Zinn argues (2008: 36-37), this process of individualisation occurs within a self-culture – a pursuit of individual autonomy and success and the writing of one's own biography under conditions of emancipation. In a self-culture one is searching for an aesthetically satisfying lifestyle, an emphasis on freedom and autonomy and is accompanied by a focus on practice and concrete problems and outcomes. It leads to prioritizing activities and engagements which cause direct results and personal gains.

In light of the focus of my thesis, this notion of risk becomes central since it is inherently linked to the notion of self, to the determination of one's own life-course, to one's identity work. Risk therefore has to do with taking responsibility for an individual biography and the risk lies in failing to create a successful biography – not being able to live up to one's own dreams. The challenge is that very often the systems of the state and the market all too often do not allow space for the majority of individuals to exercise their individual autonomy well, particularly when they are marginalised from both of these institutions as is the case for the participants in this research. However, as Zinn (2008) notes, the failings of these systems are downplayed in favour of personal failure. "Risk therefore becomes seen as individually originating rather than as a systematic problem." Beck therefore notes that "All too swiftly, the 'elective', 'reflexive' or 'do it yourself' biography can become the breakdown biography" (Beck 1999: 12).

2.2.   Culture and risk

Douglas (1992) comes from an anthropological background and was writing at a time when a great deal of work on risk was located in the medical and technical fields, where risk was interpreted as being real. What she introduces to the debate is the notion that firstly, risks can be imagined or

constructed rather than real and secondly, an analysis of why certain risks come to be seen as more threatening or important than other risks.. As Lupton (1999: 2) notes,

> For exponents of the technico-scientific perspective, which emerged from and is expressed in such disciplines as science, engineering, psychology, economics, medicine and epidemiology, risk is largely treated as a taken for granted objective phenomenon. The focus of research on risk in these fields is the identification of risks, mapping their causal factors, building predictive models of risk relations and people's responses to various types of risk and proposing ways of limiting the effects of risk.

What Douglas offered to this field was an analysis of why certain risks receive more attention than others. She noted that perceptions of risk are socially and culturally determined, which is why certain groups will be more concerned with particular risks than other groups (Tulloch, 2008). She explained this by noting that perceptions of risk had to do with the morals and values upheld by particular groups. Thus, a particular threat comes to be defined as more or less risky because it violates one or more of a group's closely held morals or values. She goes on to note that often risks are constructed as originating from the "other," someone outside of the group that threatens the group. Douglas made a major contribution to the field of risk research and in many ways paved the way for the social sciences, in particular anthropology and sociology, to lay claim to research in a field that had been dominated by a technical approach, precisely because she introduced the notion that risk is in part socially constructed.

The sociological study of risk and locating risk as something that is culturally constructed has stemmed a myriad of subsequent works (see for instance Lash & Wynne, 1993; Furedi, 1997, 2002; Lupton 2000; Lash, 2000; Van Loon, 2002; Boholm, 2003;Tulloch & Lupton 2003)) and new theories such as that of Edgework – a theory of risk noting how taking risks (or living on the edge) is culturally shaped and viewed as a positive aspect of life (Lyng, 2005).

Lupton (1999), and Tulloch and Lupton (2003), building on Douglas (1992) take a social constructivist view of risk. They view risk not as something real and "out there" but rather as a something that is culturally and socially constructed. In this view, (according to Zinn 2008) whether the threat is real or not is irrelevant. What is important and what is most interesting is how risk is constructed in the minds and lives of people and in particular groups and what effect that has on their everyday lives. As Tulloch & Lupton (2003) note,

> Most psychological research, at least in recent times, has recognised the importance of sociocultural frameworks in risk assessment. Our approach differs in both acknowledging the importance of discourse in the construction of risk epistemologies and in emphasizing that *all* risk epistemologies are socially constructed, including those of 'experts'. Rather than drawing a distinction between 'rational' and 'irrational' (or 'accurate' and 'biased') risk

assessment, we prefer to concentrate on the meanings that are imputed to risk and how these meanings operate as part of people's notions of subjectivity and their social relations.

The Culture and Risk school's notion of risk is particularly important conceptually for this research since it locates notions of risk both within social networks that are held together by common norms and values; as well as in individual biographies. Thus, it provides a framework for understanding how young people interpret and negotiate risk that points to the importance of analysing risk with both social networks and individual biographies in mind. It also provides an additional motivation for the use of ethnography in this research, since risk, from this perspective, must be understood in the everyday lives and negotiations of individuals in groups.

An additional issue that Douglas raises, which is important for this research is the notion that risk is often associated with the "other" – usually a marginalised group. This may emerge as an important point in the research since the participants in the study are economically and socially marginalised. To *what extent therefore are notions of risk in* relation to HIV, substance abuse and crime, constructed as being located in this group of marginalised young people and do these young people buy into this interpretation?

Drawing on the theories outlined above, I take elements of each in my own conceptualisation of risk. Firstly, it needs to be stated that whilst I acknowledge that there most certainly are very real risks that young people face, I am more interested in how those risks are socially interpreted. Even more importantly I am interested in how young people construct the notion of risk in their identity work, regardless of whether the risks they perceive are real or not. Thus I lean more towards a social constructivist notion of risk.

Secondly, whilst much of the work in the area of risk behaviour has noted engaging in risk as a negative aspect of decision making, I choose in this research not to make a call on whether risk is positive or negative. Although I am interested in making recommendations about how to reduce risk behaviour amongst young people, I think it is important to first understand what risk means for young people. For some risk may be viewed positively in some instances and negatively in others. Drawing on the work of Lyng (2005) and edgework theorists, I want to remain open to the possibility that risk may in fact play a positive role in some young people's lives, depending on what that risk is. This needs to be better understood.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, drawing on the work of both Beck (1992) and the Risk and Culture theorists (Douglas, 1992; Lupton 2000; Tulloch & Lupton 2003) I am interested in risk as it pertains to the identity work of young people. I therefore conceptualise risk as something that is fundamentally located in the biographies of young people, as well as in the social networks within

which they choose to move. Risk therefore has to do with the decisions that young people make about their own life course, what they want to achieve, and how they want to be remembered. The notion of institutional individualism (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) in this regard is particularly useful as it notes how modernity has shaped a society in which individual pursuit and selfhood becomes so important, despite our reliance on the state and the economy. The Culture and Risk theorists' notion of risk also becomes important. As Lash (1993) argues, how risks are understood and negotiated may be linked to aesthetic, emotional and knowledge based aspects of an individual's biography and is grounded in everyday experiences and social relationships. Group notions of risk and how social networks shape what we perceive as risky and what risks we are more likely to take in relation to who we are also become central in this conceptualisation of risk.

2.3.   Risk in identity work

Conceptualised in this way, risk is of course something that affects all people's daily lives. In the same way, identity construction is a lifelong process. I chose to work with the concept of *identity work* (McCall, 2003; Bottrell, 2007), as opposed to the notion of identity construction since it is a term that alludes to the active role we each play in shaping our identity. It is also a concept that is more suitable than the more commonly used *identity construction,* which tends to suggest that our identities are constructed in daily life and are shaped by various socialisation processes and structures, and which does not point to the very active work that we as agents do in our own self-identification and, particularly in certain points in our lives, most notably (and most importantly for this thesis) in the period after leaving school and perhaps leaving home (and thus emerging from primary socialisation processes), but before entering tertiary education or work (and thus not yet in a new structured socialising environment). The absence of structured socialisation processes in this period therefore leaves a space during which profound identity work is often entered into by the individual. Identity work according to McCall (2003: 17) can be seen as a process of defining and maintaining a sense of self-concept, which involves a process of deciding on hierarchy and salience of identities, including and excluding available definitions of self, and "role-taking" or practicing behaviours that are commonly expected of a certain label. Questioning of previously held norms and values and expectations of behaviour results in a process during which young people must decide for themselves which social networks matter and what that means for their self-identification. As a concept it connects with Beck & Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) work on individualisation which alludes to the notion of selfhood or of developing an individual biography. It is this process, and the role that risk plays in this process that is at the core of my interest, and I think might go some way in answering my initial interest of why young people seem less able to negotiate risk behaviour as they get older.

3. Research design and methods – eliciting the voices of young people

In deciding on the research design that would inform this study, I considered two key issues. Firstly, the logical basis of the research design, and how that related to the theoretical underpinnings guiding the research was considered. As you will no doubt have noticed, the way I have conceptualised both risk and identity work points to very intricate personal (yet social) processes that cannot be interrogated through once off interviews and certainly not through surveys. As with all research, the research design selected had to be the most adequate design to answer the research question as well as the most consistent with the theoretical approach used in the study. This is covered in detail in my thesis methodology chapter[2] and will not be covered in this paper.

However, a second and perhaps equally important consideration played a significant role in the selection of the research design and that was the desire for this research to play a role in giving voice to young people, whose voices are in many ways marginalised. In this respect, the research draws on the new sociology of childhood, which places greater emphasis on seeing young people and children, not simply as objects of research but as participants with "competency and agency" and which stresses the involvement of young people as co-participants in research (Christiansen & Prout, 2002 in Heath, Brooks, Cleaver & Ireland, 2009: 8). Both of these considerations led me to decide on ethnography as the most appropriate research design for this study.

Ethnography requires that the researcher spend a great deal of time in field, understanding the context in which people live, understanding people's daily lived experiences and developing "a *descriptive* account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do" (Johnson, 2000). The ethnographic design allowed us to spend time getting to know and developing a relationship of trust with participants. This was essential in allowing us not only to learn from observation and informal conversations, but also to get us to a point where were able to ask sensitive questions about their lives and who they see themselves as.

A range of methods have been used in the course of the research including direct and participant observation, informal conversations, in-depth interviews, photo diaries, social network maps, and risk stories (as opposed to life stories). A total of eleven participants have participated in the study from beginning to end. These include seven women and four men. Other participants have informally dropped out of the study as time has gone by and the findings presented here draw on the experiences of those who continue to participate.

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[2] Available upon request

4. Emerging findings

It must be emphasised at this point that, whilst it is tempting to try and establish causality in issues such as risk behaviour, the reality is in fact far more complex than a simple X + Y = Z. Whilst quantitative studies in the field of risk have established some of the factors such as knowledge and attitudes that might contribute to different levels of risk behaviour, one of the advantages of qualitative methods such as ethnography is that it helps to uncover the complexities of social life in relation to risk. From our relatively small sample of eleven participants, it is clear that there are no correlational or causal relationships[3] between the different factors discussed below. For instance, whilst some of the participants have a relatively higher sense of trust than others, their risk behaviours are much the same. What this paper thus seeks to do is point out some of the ways in which risk is negotiated and some of the issues that play a role in this negotiation, and to try and capture the complexity of identity work along the way.

4.1. Risk and place

Research on risk and neighbourhood networks has demonstrated the ways in which young people living in neighbourhoods where there are higher levels of substance use and abuse or of crime, are more likely to become involved in substance use or crime themselves. This often has to do with neighbourhood role models (see for instance Ward, 2007; Draus & Carlson, 2009). What they often have not pointed to is the role that the actual environment as well as identification with the environment might play in risk.

The informal settlement in which this work was conducted is a high risk environment for all of the people who inhabit it. It is demarcated from the rest of the township by a main road, along which there is a constant flow of relatively heavy traffic. There are no traffic calming measures or points at which pedestrians can safely cross the road, despite the fact that children have to cross the road to get to schools. In addition, refuse removal is intermittent and when refuse is removed it is removed from points on the outskirts of the informal settlement where residents have to dump their refuse on the ground. No refuse bins or containers are provided. On many occasions we have visited the area to find children playing on and around the refuse, constituting a strong health risk. Stagnant water also lies in the ditches that surround the homes of residents. Many of our participants also note that whilst the settlement is much safer today than it was in the 1990's, there are still regular incidents of crime in the area and walking around at night is not safe. What this demonstrates is that the settlement is a high risk environment in which to live. In fact, the name of the settlement, when

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[3] Not that our methodology would have been able to establish correlations or causality, but the temptation is often to try and extend the discussion to make such conclusions.

directly translated means *to risk death*[4]. Very clearly then, young people who have spent many years in the settlement or in similar situations have grown up in spaces that are risky. Some might say that they have developed immunity to risk. I don't believe that this is necessarily the case, but what is interesting is the way in which our participants talk about their relationship to the place.

Besides the context in which the participants live, it is also interesting to note the ways in which participants identify with the place. Time and again participants noted their relationship with the settlement, the ways in which they identified or did not identify with the place in which they live. It became very clear from a number of participants that the main road separating the settlement from the rest of the township is not only a geographical and physical boundary, it is also a psychological boundary for the residents of the settlement and, according to participants, for the residents of the surrounding areas. According to the participants, residents of the settlement were 'known' for teenage pregnancies, high numbers of births, drinking and substance abuse, as well as crime. There is thus a very clearly recognised stigma associated with living in the informal settlement as opposed to the neighbourhoods surrounding them.

Participants have different ways of associating with or dissociating themselves from this perception. Some do not want to be seen to be too closely associated with the place. This plays itself out in their actions and the way they negotiate their space. Very often they will spend a great deal of time indoors or doing as little as possible outside with neighbours. They do not want to participate or be seen to participate in the daily time passing activities of the settlement such as gambling or hair braiding. One participant noted how she watched the goings on in the area from inside her home. Where possible these participants will try to leave the settlement, either over weekends by visiting family or friends in the neighbouring areas or leaving the area to go elsewhere (Soweto or Daveyton) for the weekend, or by planning trips home (to the rural areas) to look forward to.

When in the area they dissociate themselves by dressing differently. One participant notes how you know when someone is from the *kasi* because he dresses *kasi* and walks *kasi*. Participants who try to dissociate themselves dress as well as possible, some wearing church outfits, and others wearing old work uniforms or other work wear that suggests importance. The intention seems to be to denote that they are "good" people and are not to be confused with *kasi* people.

It also operates in their thoughts on child rearing. Some felt that the settlement was not a place to bring up children, especially girl children, since they picked up on the negative attitudes and behaviours too quickly. One of the male participants explicitly noted how he did not want his

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[4] The site was not chosen because of the name. The meaning of the name only became clear through conversations with participants.

daughter to grow up near him in the settlement. Another young mother, when commenting on her toddler son's bad behaviour noted how "he picks it up on the streets here." Shortly after that she sent him to be raised by her mother in a rural area. A further way in which participants dissociate themselves with the settlement is by their use of the word 'home.' A great deal has been written on the notion of home amongst migrants, and all of the participants are in some sense migrants (the informal settlement was established in 1992) although some have been in the settlement for longer than others. Nevertheless those who tend to dissociate themselves from the settlement tend not to call it home. Home is rather in the rural areas or an urban township.

Related to this is the observation that some of the participants also express a desire to get out of the informal settlement. This has to some extent to do with the conditions in which they live (service delivery protests and demands for RDP housing are frequent topics of discussion in the settlement), but it is also associated with escaping the connotations associated with living in the settlement and creating better opportunities for oneself. One male participant often talks of moving to Soweto where he would have better prospects because he will be able to network with a better sort of person there. He feels that the people he knows in Soweto have a better influence on him than those who he associated in his own area. Another female participant took active (very risky) steps to leave the settlement in order to settle in another neighbourhood about 3 kilometres from the settlement. This involved her sleeping concurrently with two men (her boyfriend in the settlement and her prospective boyfriend in the neighbouring area) both of whom were abusing her. Once she was sure that the partner in the neighbouring area could and would provide her with a home she broke off the relationship with her boyfriend in the settlement.

Then there are those who acknowledge that the settlement carries the connotations outlined above but who still see themselves as part of the community. They are the participants who are often more difficult to find as they are visiting with neighbours, braiding hair or playing games. While most still acknowledge the associations that go along with living in the settlement, they either are ambivalent about what the implications are for them or they challenge the way that it is perceived. They challenge it in two ways: firstly, they do not deny that the settlement is a risky place, but they do note how the kinds of activities associated with the settlement happen in the neighbouring areas as well. Secondly, some are involved in activities aimed at bettering the community. One participant for instance is vested in coaching the community football team, another tries to provide information about training and job opportunities to young people in the area and has set up a youth organisation. Another young woman voluntary helps out at the local crèche.

Whether the participants associate with or dissociate from the community, what they all do is try to distance themselves from the connotations of risk that the settlement carries. All of the participants are involved in some kind of risk behaviour to a greater or lesser extent, and yet they do not want to be seen to be the ones that the sentiments are directed at. Douglas' notion of risk and the other (1992) may be useful in explaining some of these relationships. The residents of the settlement are seen by residents of neighbouring areas as the other that brings in the risk. These young people try in different ways to reject that label, even though they themselves are still engaged in different levels of risk taking.

Closely related to some of the issues raised in this section is the relationship between future focus, hope and trust.

4.2. Future focus, hope and risk

Some research has pointed to the role that leisure boredom plays in risk behaviour (see Wegner & Flisher 2009). There is no doubt that there are very high levels of boredom in the settlement in which this research has been conducted. Given that participants are not in education, training or employment, and given the relative lack of activities available for young people to engage in, most participants indicated in response to questions about what they do with their time during the week and on the weekends that there was little to do and that they were bored. Wegner & Flisher (2009) argue that leisure boredom is reduced amongst young people who have a sense of goals and future focus, and are able to work towards those goals.

This is something that has influenced loveLife's thinking over the past few years. They note that young people definitely feel positive about the future. However, many lack the ability to turn their optimism about the abstract future into something that is personally relevant and attainable. This thinking prompted their launch of the Make Your Move campaign aimed at helping young people to set goals and identify attainable opportunities for their own development.

Taking Beck & Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) work into consideration, the notion of selfhood and the societal pressure to make something of oneself (individualisation), to establish a biography worth telling could potentially lead to a sense of future focus as young people try to determine a future for themselves. However, in the context of marginalisation from employment and education opportunities, as Beck (1999) puts it "all too swiftly, the 'elective', 'reflexive' or 'do it yourself' biography can become the breakdown biography."

Related to the notion of place, the idea that one can make something of oneself and create a story worth telling, is pushed aside in a context of hopelessness. There is a very strong notion of what I

will call the *kasi*[5] blinkers, particularly amongst some of the female participants. Here, despite wanting to dissociate themselves from living in the settlement, there is almost an entrapment within the settlement, and an inability to see beyond the settlement. This is expressed in questions about whether we will take them somewhere else, and an interest in our knowledge of other places in Johannesburg. For some of the participants, besides going back to the rural areas, they very rarely leave the settlement and certainly not the broader township. Some of these participants have taken risks in getting to Johannesburg, escaping negative family circumstances and risking a new life in an unknown area, hoping for a better future. In this context risk is associated with seeking better opportunities and a better life. However, once they have established a sense of security in their new surroundings there is reluctance to explore further, a reluctance to take a further (potentially positive) risk. As a result, we often find these participants at home and they value the time that we spend with them as it breaks the monotony of the day. However, the situation they find themselves in is one of boredom, and one of few opportunities to create their "elective biographies." We are currently investigating whether this lack of sense of future and hope may then have something to do with decisions to have unprotected sex, which results in children[6].

There is the potential though to change one's biography by taking risks and participants will weigh up the gains versus the potential harm that these risks entail. The story of the young women who manages to move into a nearby neighbourhood involved her taking risks by entering into another abusive relationship, and sleeping with at least two men concurrently. Although she is in an abusive relationship, the risks have meant that she has greater financial security and that she lives in a slightly better neighbourhood. Another participant talks about having a job in which he was moving up the ladder quite quickly since his managers trusted him. The job gave him the potential to earn enough money to leave the settlement. However, fellow workers threatened him with witchcraft and he felt that it became too risky for him to go to work. He left the job shortly thereafter.

Risk thus has the potential to play both positive and negative roles in these young people's biographies. Taking risks holds the potential to open up opportunities for a biography worth remembering. However, the same risks might also carry potential harmful consequences for them. Weighing up the risks is not something that can be predicted by psychologists, epidemiologists or sociologists. All we can say is that these risks are intimately related to the kind of biography a person wishes to create, their appetite for risk (Lyng, 2005) and how confident they feel of being able to create that biography as opposed to living a "breakdown biography" (Beck, 1999).

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[5] *Kasi* here is used in the way some of the participants use the term, to refer to the settlement as opposed to the broader township.

[6] All of the women in our sample, bar one, are young mothers or mothers to be.

4.3. Risk and trust

A striking finding that has become recurrent in the data collection is the very low levels of trust that are evident amongst all of our participants, and to a greater degree amongst our female participants. In the process of developing social network maps we ask participants to identify people on their map who they trust. Almost all of the participants have noted that they "don't trust anyone." When probed further on this they may reluctantly identify a mother or grandmother, but many continue to claim that they don't trust anyone. This is in contrast to many community surveys (see for instance De Wet et al. 2007), which note that there are relatively high levels of trust in communities, calculated from responses to questions such as "do you trust your neighbours?" These responses are used to suggest that people living in poorer communities often have relatively high levels of social capital. We must therefore interrogate these responses from our participants.

While this is still a finding that needs further investigation there is one potential implication of low levels of trust and risk. All but one of our female participants are young mothers or young mothers-to-be. However, most were in a relationship with the father of their child for quite some time before falling pregnant (upward of two years). This might suggest that they were in a monogamous and trusting relationship. However, all but one indicated that they did not trust the fathers of their children, even if they were still in a relationship with him.

In a context of very low levels of trust generally, the trust one places on different people within one's social network becomes relative. Thus, although participants feel that they don't trust anyone, they may trust their partners more than they trust a friend or a family member and thus feel relatively safer having unprotected sex with him. As such, whilst they may be making the best possible decision in terms of what the risk behaviour literature and programmes tell us (i.e. if you are going to have unprotected sex make sure it is with someone you trust to be faithful and make sure you remain faithful) in the context of low levels of trust, this is still a risky decision to make.

5. Conclusions

Perhaps the only thing that has emerged clearly in the research thus far is how multi-layered and dimensional risk negotiation is in the biographies of young people. Clearly contexts of marginalisation, dependency and gender relations all have a role to play as previous literature has pointed out. But there remains a need to understand the agency of young people and their desires to create an elective biography within their social circumstances. Risk very clearly plays a role in this process and this paper has sought to point out some of the complexities involved in this. Further

analysis and indeed future research is needed to more fully understand these intricacies in order to develop programmes and policies that more adequately speak to the needs of young people.

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