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Making sense of risk together: a dissertation on the social factors that drive risk talk

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 How this dissertation came to be

In early 2020, I had the following conversation with a neighbor:

Me: “How are you holding up?”

Nb.: “Oh, I’m doing great! I’m going to Mexico in a couple of weeks.”

Me: “That so? Are you sure that’s... you know, smart? With most of the world in lockdown and all?”

Nb.: “Yeah, it’ll be fine. It hasn’t even gotten to Mexico yet. Besides, it’s no worse than the flu.”

Even with the lack of clarity on the actual severity of COVID-19 during the early days of the pandemic, I left the conversation with a raised eyebrow. Later that day, I called my mother, and we agreed that if some people are this careless, then we were going to take extra precautions to balance the scales.

Cut to about a year and a half later. I had been working as a doctoral candidate for a few months and had finally decided on the overall topic of my dissertation: risk perception. Gotta be topical. Imagine my surprise, however, when, upon engaging with the risk perception literature, I noticed the glaring absence of conversations, such as the one depicted above. Instead, risk perception was commonly portrayed as a product of risk characteristics and characteristics of individual risk perceivers. Social factors—conversations, social norms, media effects—while not completely unmentioned, were relegated to a quiet corner of the literature and seldom taken into consideration by the larger frameworks of risk perception. Could it really be that conversations had no

meaningful influence on our thinking whatsoever? Prior experience told me that this could not be true. As such, I embarked on an exploration of interpersonal discussion on risk, also known as *risk talk*.

1.2 Setting the Scene

This dissertation is situated predominantly within the fields of risk perception and risk communication and draws on insights from social psychology and health behavior research insofar as they have been applied to the social construction of risk. The interpretive lens is synthesized from the Social Amplification of Risk Framework and the Cognitive Mediation Model from communication research, Social Representations Theory and Identity Processing Theory from social psychology, and the Goffmanian notion of facework from sociology. In addition, the Planned Risk Information Seeking Model (PRISM) from communication research and Health Belief Model from health behavior research have informed the empirical operationalization of the research. In this section, the theoretical lens is further described and linked to the objective of this dissertation.

The history of risk talk arguably starts with Mary Douglas' and Aaron Wildavsky's *Risk and culture: An essay on the selection of technical and environmental dangers* (1982). At the time of publication, the dominant paradigm was that of the Knowledge Deficit Model: risk analysts produce rational, objective risk knowledge, and the public, upon reception, misunderstands this information to various degrees (Covello, 2001; Fischhoff, 1995; Gregory & Miller, 1998). Douglas and Wildavsky demonstrated that, without perfect knowledge, there is no such thing as an objective risk assessment. Rather, risk must be perceived through a cultural lens and shaped through prior knowledge, values, and expectations.

One of the earliest and most influential contributions to the field of social risk construction was the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) by Kasperson et al. (1988). The SARF envisioned the social processing of risk as a process of amplification and attenuation through amplification stations: organizations, authorities, media, and direct communication to name a few. Consequently, the SARF was one of the earliest pieces of literature to formalize interpersonal communication as a site for social risk processing. Empirical evidence for the social transformation of risk information theorized by Kasperson et al. started appearing in the 1990s with the concept of lay epidemiology (Davison et al., 1991, 1992). Laypeople, they observed, collectively engage in sensemaking practices—lay epidemiologies—through which formal and in-

formal evidence of health risks is interpreted. They additionally brought important nuance to the field of interpersonal risk communication by showing that these lay epidemiologies intersect with identity work and are often fueled by prejudices (Davison et al., 1991).

In more recent times, multiple theories have been applied to the topic of social risk processing. Of these, an important development was the application of Social Representations Theory (SRT) to lay meaning-making processes (Joffe, 2003). This approach posits that people map new risk information onto existing systems of knowledge, social values, and priorities—known as mental models—to determine what is deemed reasonable behavior in one’s in-group in the face of risk (Breakwell, 2010). A central tenet of this approach is that these mappings are socially negotiated in order to protect existing values within the group. This approach was further expanded upon through the integration of Identity Processing Theory (IPT) with SRT (Breakwell, 2010, 2015). IPT, originally meant to explain coping strategies in the face of identity threats, provided depth to the aspect of identity work within SRT by showing how people adjust risk beliefs and behaviors to protect their identities (Breakwell, 2014). To illustrate, an individual who values autonomy and self-reliance may be resistant to mandatory vaccination, as accepting such a vaccine may equate subjugating oneself to the will of the authorities.

The Goffmanian notion of facework to was introduced to the topic of risk (Myers, 2003, 2007). Goffman sees interpersonal communication as a precarious balancing act through which an individual attempts to have the image they project of themselves accepted by the interlocutor in order to maintain face within the interaction. Myer’s research demonstrates the contentiousness of risk conversations and the strategies that people use to navigate them. In a risk context, the notion posits that any conversation about risk holds the potential for loss of face, making risk talk inherently precarious. When one is prompted to defend or change one’s behavior, as one often is in conversations concerning risk, such a challenge is not confined to the risk behavior in question. Rather, when an individual is accused of underestimating a risk, the implication is that they are ill-informed, naïve, or careless. Similarly, overestimating a risk may label a person as anxious, overreacting, or cowardly.

Finally, the Cognitive Mediation Model (CMM) posits that people engage in more elaborative cognitive processing of new information when they are motivated to learn, and that this, in turn, increases knowledge gains (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2004; Eveland Jr, 2001). That is, an individual is more likely to engage in active processing of new information and thereby learn and retain the knowledge better, when they have a

vested interest in the information. In a risk talk context, this suggests that a person is more likely to engage in risk talk when they have either a strong interest in or a high risk perception of the risk topic at hand (see e.g., Zhang, L. & Yang, X., 2021). In turn, when people engage in risk talk, the natural obtrusiveness of conversation may force people to engage in active processing of the risk information to a higher extent than when receiving the information passively, e.g., through the news. Risk information may thus be more likely to prompt people to update their risk perceptions when people engage in conversation about it.

This branch of research has thus demonstrated that interpersonal conversations about risk are important loci for the social processing of risk information, where social norms, values, and identities play defining roles. Nevertheless, as shall be outlined in the following section, certain tensions have resulted from risk talk being independently conceptualized with differing emphases. In particular, the social functions of risk information processing have not yet made the leap from theoretical frameworks and more theory-heavy fields to empirical studies within risk communication research, especially in terms of quantitative research. As will be outlined in the coming sections, this dissertation aims to help strengthen the connection between these two realms.

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1.3 The Research Gap

While the theoretical tapestry of risk talk is thus rich, communication between theory and empirical modeling is lacking. In most cases, quantitative studies on risk perception, which include social influence, network, interpersonal discussion, media reliance (family and friends), or whichever term they use to refer to social risk processing (Griffin & Dunwoody, 2000; Wild & Cunningham, 2001; Zhang, L. & Yang, X., 2021; Zhao et al., 2018), draw on models from either health psychology or media research, such as the Health Belief Model, the Cognitive Mediation Model, or the Impersonal/Differential Impact Hypothesis. These models treat interpersonal discussion predominantly as a pathway for information-seeking and -sharing. Whereas this is sufficient for the study of information dissemination pathways, public risk attitudes are famously more than the outcome of information (Fischhoff, 1995; Siegrist & Árvai, 2020). In a few cases, the study of the social processing of risk talk draws on Social Influence Theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Duinen et al., 2015; Knoll et al., 2017), which concerns itself with the social alignment of attitudes through conformity and compliance. However, while Social Influence Theory in general does leave room for

multidirectional pathways of influence (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Moscovici & Zavalloni, 1969), risk perception research specifically almost always treats social influence as a unidirectional process from the collective to the individual. The reciprocal nature of interpersonal risk talk is thus not operationalized to any substantial extent.

The SARF illustrates the complexity inherent in social risk processing to a further extent than information-centered models. In practice, however, the SARF has mainly been used for the study of the effects of media and public campaigns (J. X. Kasperson et al., 2003; R. E. Kasperson et al., 2022). A likely reason for this is the difficulty inherent in studying large-scale effects of individual conversations: in contrast to media effects, the impact of which are supposedly clear, often immediate, and confined to a narrow window of time (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020), the effects of conversations are subtle (Brauer et al., 1995), delayed (Hannah & Sternthal, 1984), and influenced by contextual factors (Green, 2020). With the proliferation of social media in society, the concepts of media and interpersonal communication have blurred to some extent, prompting investigation into amplification stations that include forms of interpersonal communication (Strekalova & Krieger, 2017; Wirz et al., 2018; Zhang & Cozma, 2022). Nevertheless, studies into social network discourse often use Twitter as a data source, not distinguishing between conversations with known and unknown others and often treating them as if they were one and the same phenomenon.

While thus understudied, quantitative investigations of risk talk are not completely absent. For instance, Binder et al., looked at valence and frequency of conversation about living near a biological research facility (2011). They found that higher frequency of conversations amplified a participant's attitude in whichever direction the attitude leaned prior to the conversations. That is, if someone was in moderate support of the construction of a biological research facility near their home, that support would be strengthened through repeat conversation. Additionally, they found that the valence of an interlocutor—that is, whether the interlocutor was for or against the facility—predicted a change in attitude consistent with the valence of the interlocutor. This finding was further corroborated by de Groot et al. (2020), who similarly found frequency to be a significant predictor of attitude change. Kusumi et al. (2017) also studied interpersonal risk communication and found that participants were more adapt the strength of their statements about a nuclear risk based on the perceived opinions of the population. If participants believed that population risk perception about nuclear risk was either lower or characterized by a higher level of disagreement, then they would tone down the strength of their statements about nuclear risk. The literature review in Chapter 2 provides an extensive elaboration on previous empir-

ical research with an emphasis on how the relationship between risk talk and risk perception is operationalized quantitatively.

Aside from these studies, little is known about the relationship between risk talk and risk perception. Moreover, as illustrated by these studies, even dedicated studies tend to treat risk talk as a predictor variable and rarely move beyond frequency and valence in terms of operationalization complexity. As such, even if predominantly interesting to risk perception research as a predictor, more studies dedicated to risk talk as a phenomenon in its own right are needed in order to fully understand how risk is socially processed and interact with risk perception and relevant variables.

1.4 The Aim of This Dissertation

This dissertation aims to endogenize risk talk within the study of risk communication. Rather than treating risk talk solely as a predictor variable of risk perception or behavior, the dissertation investigates risk talk as a locus of social meaning-making with inherent complexity that warrants dedicated attention. Risk talk is, in many ways, the smallest possible unit of communication; by understanding how such units function, we may not only gain insights into the processing of risk at the interpersonal level but also better understand how aggregate trends function. Additionally, investigations into risk talk may help risk scholarship better understand and appreciate the experience and agency of individuals as they navigate a reality saturated by risk (Beck & Wynne, 1992). In this dissertation, the following research question is addressed:

Which social conditions drive interpersonal communication about risk among laypeople?

The systematic literature review on on the association between risk talk and risk perception (Chapter 2) identified a need for an endogenization of risk talk. To the extent that interpersonal risk talk has been investigated previously within a risk communication context, this has predominantly been either as an amplification and attenuation station of risk perception or as a predictor of health behavior. Nevertheless, the literature review revealed that risk talk is an inconsistent predictor and suggested that these inconsistencies may stem from treating risk talk as a uniform phenomenon. Instead, risk talk may take many forms depending on social conditions and risk characteristics. Among these social conditions, three emerged from the literature review as both under-researched and particularly salient. Each of the following empirical chapters investigates one of these conditions.

First, while much empirical research operationalizes risk talk as mainly happening with friends and family, this locus of risk talk is largely assumed. Additionally, little is known about people's preferences for other characteristics of potential interlocutors. Knowing such preferences could provide insights into which social constellations might be more conducive to the occurrence of risk talk. Chapter 3 therefore addresses the following research question: *Which preferences for risk talk can be identified among lay respondents? More specifically, which attributes of risk talk most significantly influence individuals' decisions to participate?* The chapter uses a theory-informed confirmatory design, examining variables that are frequently considered important drivers of risk talk—as well as conversation in general.

Second, when comparing existing studies on risk talk about different risks, it became clear that risk talk leads to different outcomes depending on the risk in question. This idea mirrors the psychometric paradigm (Slovic, 1987), which presents risk perception as partially determined by risk characteristics not directly associated with the probability or severity of the risk in question. While the literature review did not include any hypothesis testing, the following preliminary pattern emerged from multiple empirical studies: risks associated with lifestyle choices tended to produce a negative association between risk talk and risk perception (e.g., Crawford et al., 2018; Rau et al., 2010), while risks on less everyday hazards like nuclear power or environmental pollution produced a positive association (e.g., Lin et al., 2017; Vyncke et al., 2017). This led to an initial hypothesis that more socially normalized risks lead to less active processing of the advantages and disadvantages of a given risk behavior and vice versa. Differences in active processing may help explain why risk talk outcomes are often inconsistent across—and even within—existing behavioral science studies. Chapter 4 thus addresses the question: *To what extent does the perceived social acceptability of a risk predict people's propensity to engage in risk talk?*

Finally, the systematic literature revealed that little attention had been paid to *why* people engage in risk talk. Models such as the Differential Impact Hypothesis (Basil & Brown, 1997; Coleman, 1993) have shown that people treat information obtained through interpersonal contacts differently to information obtained through media. In addition, a single study suggested that risk talk may have an emotional support function (Zhang, L. & Yang, X., 2021)—a suggestion that aligns well with the notion of risk as feeling (Loewenstein et al., 2001). Therefore, it is possible that risk talk serves different functions than simply as an information exchange avenue or a norm construction locus. In order to arrive at a better understanding for why people engage in risk talk in everyday life, then, Chapter 5 addresses the question: *What*

motivates laypeople to initiate conversations about risk with peers, and what outcomes do they perceive from such conversations?

This dissertation has important implications for risk communication and risk perception research. I demonstrate that risk talk, while complex, has rich potential to be studied in more detail. I also show that risk talk, while in a complex reciprocal relationship with risk perception as well as traditional predictors of risk perception—values, cultural background, and prior knowledge, to name a few (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020)—is more than the verbal expression of these factors, but is, instead, an important locus for the social processing of risk. From a policy perspective, this dissertation provides important evidence that people hold significant agency in their processing of risk information, and that risk communication must be tailored to the social context in question. My findings further support the idea, if preliminarily so, that risk communicators can benefit substantially from thinking outside of the top-down box of traditional risk communication.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 *Overall Design Logic*

This dissertation is article-based. This approach aligns well with the planned investigation of interpersonal risk talk from multiple angles and with the use of multiple methods. In addition, an article-based dissertation allows for the timely dissemination of research findings, and the peer review process adds additional external scrutiny.

An important goal with this dissertation was to address the divide between quantitative and qualitative branches of risk talk research. As such, the chosen methods are all approaches, which balance fine-grained operationalizations with a degree of external validity. A combination of analytical techniques allows for a rich investigation of risk talk, while maintaining the potential for integration into future quantitative models.

Chapter 2 comprises a systematic literature review of the association between risk talk and risk perception. This literature review aimed to generate the most important questions about risk talk within the context of risk perception research. The literature review gave rise to three pertinent questions, which I address in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 investigates people's preferences in terms of interlocutor characteristics when talking about risk. The chapter is meant to further understanding of the social constellations most conducive to risk talk. It employs a conjoint design,

which is highly suitable for uncovering latent preferences in respondents. Chapter 4 investigates the extent to which socially normalized risk is less conducive to risk talk engagement. This study employs a vignette design and is analyzed using multivariate regression as well as structural equation modeling (SEM). The latter in particular was chosen due to the complex relationships between risk talk, risk perception, and other relevant variables. Finally, Chapter 5 investigates the motivations and perceived outcomes of conversations on risk. This study employs a thematic analysis on answers to open-ended questions, thereby letting respondents narrate their own experiences.

1.5.2 *Core Construct*

Interpersonal risk talk is defined here as *informal communication about risk between laypeople known to each other*. As such, my definition aligns with risk talk as used by Kusumi et al. (2017) and others (e.g., Myers, 2007; Vera-Sanso, 2000). Laypeople, in this context, refers to people outside risk-related occupations. Hence, laypeople in this dissertation are individuals talking about risk from a personal standpoint in an informal setting as opposed to experts or practitioners engaging in professional discourse about risk. Importantly, my definition is thus distinct from two other definitions of risk talk that appear in the field of risk communication: practitioner-to-patient/client risk talk (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2003; White, 2018) and practitioner-to-practitioner risk talk (e.g., Linell et al., 2002; Tekathen & Dechow, 2020). In addition, within this dissertation, interpersonal risk talk refers specifically to talk about risk to health and well-being. Of course, interpersonal risk talk could also describe talk about risks to, for instance, financial health, social standing, or identity, but such risks are not included in this dissertation. While the overwhelming focus has been on risks to physical health and well-being, the chapters within this dissertation do feature mental health risk to some extent due to its deep intertwinement with physical health risks. Finally, while risk talk could refer to exchanges both in-person and via phone, message apps, and social media, the scope is restricted to communication between known others. This restriction is meant to both separate interpersonal risk talk from large-scale public social media conversation, e.g., Twitter discourse, and to emphasize the reciprocal nature of such conversations as opposed to social media posts, which do not necessarily result in reciprocal communication.

While this definition of interpersonal risk talk applies to all chapters within this dissertation, each chapter has operationalized the construct with slightly more specificity depending on the aim of the study. More details on these operationalizations

may be found in the respective chapters.

1.5.3 *Data*

The data collection for this dissertation was generously sponsored by the ISGA Institute Board, and no involvement in the research subsequent to the provision of funds took place. The data was collected by means of two original surveys on a non-probability quota sample of the Dutch adult resident population, recruited via the company Dynata’s online panel. Quotas included age and gender (interlocking) as well as education (non-interlocking). The first survey supplied data for Chapters 3 and 4, while the second survey supplied data for Chapter 5. Quality control comprised a three-step attention check and exclusion of speeders. In Survey 1, respondents were excluded if they spent less than 6 minutes on the survey. In addition, respondents were excluded from the Chapter 3 study if they spent less than 3 seconds on any single conjoint task. Survey 2 did not apply a speeder screen but excluded responses of insufficient quality based on manual review. Insufficient quality mainly refers to responses with little to no informational content, responses that did not answer the questions asked, or consecutive responses using identical phrasing, indicating bot responses.

The details of the data collection may be found in Table 1.1 below.

Time	Step	Instrument	Prelim. N	Final N
Aug 2024	Survey 1 data collection	Conjoint analysis (Ch. 3) Vignette (Ch. 4)	1774	1201 (Ch. 3) 1329 (Ch. 4)
Feb 2025	Survey 2 data collection	Open-ended questions (Ch. 5)	1493	960

Table 1.1: Data collection

While probability sampling remains the gold standard for social science research, non-probability sampling was deemed acceptable for the purposes of the research of this dissertation. Previous research has shown that non-probability online panels often differ in composition from the population at large, and variations across panels limits the predictability of these differences (Bosnjak et al., 2013; Stagnaro et al., 2024). Historically, a major bias in online panels has been the exclusion of individuals without access to the internet (Mohorko et al., 2013); however, with an internet penetration rate in the Netherlands of over 99%, this is unlikely to be a major source of bias (Eurostat, 2025a). This leaves self-selection and recruitment biases: certain people may be

more drawn to participating in online panels for a variety of reasons (enjoyment from taking surveys, rewards offered, etc.) and the specific recruiting strategies of individual online panels may attract different types of respondents across panels (Callegaro et al., 2014; Stagnaro et al., 2024). Nevertheless, literature also shows that even when panels are not representative, inference about relationships often aligns with representative sample data (Coppock et al., 2018; Mullinix et al., 2015). As the aim of this dissertation was to provide an initial investigation of the phenomenon of risk talk rather than replicate risk talk in the population with perfect accuracy, absolute sample representativeness was deemed not required. That is, even if a non-probability sample is an imperfect representation of the population, with quota sampling it is nevertheless sufficient to identify patterns and associations within interpersonal communication among laypeople.

Dynata was chosen due to their ability to provide two large samples with the allotted budget as well as their experience collaborating with academic research partners (Dynata, n.d.). Furthermore, Dynata has been shown in comparative research to outperform services like Amazon Mechanical Turk, a commonly used survey panel (Peer et al., 2022). Nevertheless, in order to ensure high quality data, attention checks were included in both surveys, and respondents showing clear signs of speeding (low response times and straightlining tendencies) were excluded. The final quotas of the sample on age, gender, and education were also compared to the composition of the population and were found, on the whole, to mirror the population well.

The Dutch population as the target population was chosen due to the typicality of the Netherlands as an EU country. Specifically, the Netherlands have an average-sized population (18 million citizens (2025) compared to the EU average (16.7 million citizens (2025)), exhibit an average life expectancy (82 years (2024)) close to the average for EU countries (81.7 years (2024)), and have universal healthcare (Eurostat, 2024, 2025b; Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2024). In addition, the country is largely homogenous, both in terms of population composition and geography (CBS, n.d.; CountryReports, n.d.), thereby mitigating cultural and geographical variations in risk exposure and risk perception. The biases of the non-probability sampling notwithstanding, the results are thus likely to generalize to the Dutch population at large and may provide robust indications of similar trends and patterns in other Western European countries.

This dissertation adheres to open science guidelines where appropriate. The OSF repository located at <https://osf.io/jze37/> contains the codebooks for both surveys as well as the pre-analysis plans and replication files for chapters 3 and 4. The anonymized

datasets from both surveys are uploaded but under embargo until March 4, 2028, to protect ongoing research outputs. Due to the exploratory nature of chapters 2 and 5, these were not preregistered.

1.5.4 *Validity and Ethics*

The studies of this dissertation are subject to limitations to validity that must be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, the sample used for this dissertation was a quota sampling and included only adult residents of the Netherlands. As such, while the findings are highly likely to reflect trends within the Dutch adult population, they are not generalizable to the same extent as a true randomized sample, and they are not generalizable to populations outside of the Netherlands. While it is highly likely that many Western countries have similar trends within interpersonal risk talk, this can ultimately not be concluded without replication studies in other populations.

Second, the survey design relies on self-reporting to a large extent. In particular, Chapter 4 relies on respondents providing accurate indications of their own attitudes and perceptions, and Chapter 5 relies to a great extent on respondents' recall ability and provision of detailed information.

Finally, outside of ethnographic approaches, any method targeting risk talk must be reductionist, and this applies to the research of this dissertation as well. While I have aimed to provide additional nuance to the construct of interpersonal risk talk compared to previous research, certain aspects of risk talk—its interaction with mental value and cultural schemata, delayed effects, and patterns of occurrence in daily conversation to name a few—are nevertheless difficult, if not impossible, to accurately capture using non-ethnographic methods.

Ethical approval for all research within this dissertation was given by the FGGA Ethics Committee under application no. 2023-025-ISGA-Perlstein. In both surveys, respondents were given a consent form informing them of their right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without consequence. Any response, in which the respondent declined participation or did not complete the survey, was removed from the sample.

1.6 Reader's Guide

Due to the various foci of the chapters as well as the standard practices and audience expectations of the journals, in which the chapters have been published or submitted,

the terminology used to refer to the phenomenon of risk talk may differ. As such, risk talk, risk conversation, and interpersonal discussion on risk are used interchangeably within this dissertation.

1.6.1 *Chapter 2: Risk Perception and Interpersonal Discussion on Risk: A Systematic Literature Review*

This systematic literature review served as a jumping off point for my remaining dissertation. It addresses the question: *What is known from an empirical perspective about the relationship between interpersonal discussion on risk and individual-level risk perception?* The review demonstrated that the relationship is complex, and that a number of questions are still unanswered. The most important findings for this dissertation are as follows. 1) The relationship between risk talk and risk perception is inconsistent: while most correlations found were significant and positive, many were negative, non-significant or demonstrated a non-linear relationship. 2) Research on risk talk often does not distinguish between risk talk and hazard talk, hazard talk being the broader category and including also topics that do not relate to risk (e.g., discussion on an already manifested hazard, evaluation of management efforts, etc.). 3) The qualitative and quantitative branches of the field communicate to a very limited extent. Qualitative explorations of interpersonal discussion of risk are closer to explorations of hazard talk and tend to investigate the social processing of the hazard in question from a variety of angles, though they rarely relate these investigations back to the frameworks often employed by quantitative researchers. Meanwhile, quantitative research often reduces risk talk to a simple—sometimes even binary—variable and rarely draw on qualitative findings in their operationalizations or contextualizations. 4) Contextual factors such as in-group characteristics and risk characteristics are under-researched. Finally, 5) risk talk research needs to better understand laypeople’s motivations for bringing up risk topics in conversation, and to what extent these align with previously assumed motivations.

1.6.2 *Chapter 3: Preferences for Risk Conversation In Everyday Life: A Conjoint Analysis*

This chapter, co-authored with Dr. Sanneke Kuipers and Dr. Jaroslaw Kantorowicz, examines an initial examination of a variety of contextual factors impacting risk talk (Q4 of the literature review) using a conjoint analysis design on the results of an original survey. We asked: *Which preferences for risk talk can be identified among lay*

respondents? More specifically, which attributes of risk talk most significantly influence individuals' decisions to participate? Conjoint analysis is a quantitative approach designed to compare the importance of multiple predictors in a decision-making situation. It thereby let us examine the relative importance of a variety of variables relating to the potential interlocutor in order to better understand which social relationships are more likely to function as avenues for social risk processing. The conjoint analysis allowed the connection of qualitative and quantitative branches of the field of risk talk research (Q3). Specifically, we compared the interlocutor characteristics *gender, relationship to the respondent, closeness with the respondent, the interlocutor's apparent knowledge of the topic, the interlocutor's apparent concern, and the interlocutor's apparent motivation*. In addition, a topic category was added to avoid respondents self-imposing topics. The results showed that that respondents preferred conversational partners to whom they are close, who are knowledgeable, and who are looking to exchange information or to feel less anxious. Hence, the results provide an indication that risk talk proliferates primarily among strong ties and among people who are well-informed. On the other hand, too heavy-handed attempts at behavioral change instigation may discourage future conversations. It is important to remember, however, that the findings of this study concern respondent *preferences*, and that we are not always in perfect control of the course and contents of the conversations in which we take part.

1.6.3 Chapter 4: Risk Talk—But Not If It Rocks the Boat. Perceived Social Risk Acceptability and Risk Talk Engagement in the Netherlands

This chapter investigated the role of the social normalization of a given risk activity for people's willingness to engage in risk talk (Q1, Q4). The study asked: *To what extent does the perceived social acceptability of a risk predict people's propensity to engage in risk talk?* Based on the findings of the literature review in Chapter 2, the fourth chapter hypothesized that risk activities more normalized in society would already have established in interpretive schemata and therefore less of a need for social processing. That is, the more normalized a risk activity is, the less likely it is to come up in conversation. The data collected was derived from the same survey as that used for Chapter 3 and underwent linear regression analysis as well as structural topic modeling analysis (SEM). Findings indicated a significant negative relationship between the level of perceived social risk acceptability (normalization) of a risk and people's proclivity

to engage in risk talk, that stayed robust, if small, when controlling for risk perception and the respondent's own willingness to engage in the risk activity in question. As hypothesized, a higher degree of normalization of a given risk activity results in a lower proclivity to talk about risk. More interestingly—though considerably more speculative—the findings suggest risk perception and risk willingness may function as mediators of the relationship between social acceptability and risk talk engagement intention. That is, the modest relationship between social acceptability and risk talk may, in fact, be due to an internalization of the social norms surrounding the risks. Additionally, while not an aim of the study in itself, respondents' own self-assessed knowledgeability of the risk in question was a strong and significant predictor of risk talk proclivity.

1.6.4 Chapter 5: “Come On Now, the Human body Doesn’t Get Skin Cancer From a Single Sunburn”—Motivations and Perceived Outcomes of Risk Talk Among Laypeople

The fifth chapter explores laypeople's motivations for engaging in risk talk (Q5). This study asked: *What motivates laypeople to initiate conversations about risk with peers, and what outcomes do they perceive from such conversations?* In this second original survey, respondents answered open-ended questions about their motivations for engaging in their most recent risk conversation, what outcomes they perceived, and how they felt immediately following the conversations. These responses then underwent thematic analysis. The results showed that the type of risk talk to occur, as well as the motivations people have for engaging, largely is dependent on the type of risk. Specifically, the study found that risks, which may be considered collective problems—and which were talked about as such—largely inspired more social meaning-making, norm negotiation, and collective problem-solving. In contrast, risks which are typically considered one's individual responsibility inspired advice-sharing, encouragement to change behavior, and venting. Finally, when a risk had already manifested, respondents would keep each other up to date on developments and management, give and receive support and understanding, and socially process difficult emotions. A notable observation in this regard is that, while all questions to the respondents specifically mentioned risk, in many cases respondents interpreted this themselves to mean *hazard* talk. That is, a question generated by this chapter is whether risk talk literature should consider ways to demarcate risk talk from other hazard-related talk, or whether these should be considered part and parcel of the same phenomenon.
