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

Perlstein, S.G.

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# Chapter 6

## Conclusion

### 6.1 Aim Revisited

This dissertation advanced understanding of interpersonal risk talk by endogenizing the phenomenon. Previous literature treated risk talk as an exogenous variable, largely reducing it to an explanatory factor for other phenomena; this dissertation examined the internal dynamics of risk talk as well as which factors lead to the occurrence of risk talk. The value of this study lies both in its insights into how people process and navigate risk in their everyday lives and in an increased understanding of interpersonal risk talk in a risk perception context. That is, to fully grasp how interpersonal communication functions as a risk amplification station, the phenomenon must be understood on its own terms before it can be meaningfully related to concepts such as risk perception and behavior.

The dissertation was guided by the following overarching research question:

*Which social conditions drive interpersonal communication about risk among laypeople?*

This question was further specified into four research questions, answered by chapters 2-5:

1. What is known from an empirical perspective about the relationship between interpersonal discussion on risk and individual-level risk perception?
2. Which preferences for risk talk can be identified among lay respondents? More specifically, which attributes of risk talk most significantly influence individuals'

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decisions to participate?

3. To what extent does the perceived social acceptability of a risk predict people's propensity to engage in risk talk?
4. What motivates laypeople to initiate conversations about risk with peers, and what outcomes do they perceive from such conversations?

To investigate these questions, several complementary methods were used: a systematic literature review based on PRISMA standards, a conjoint experiment, structural equation modeling, and thematic analysis on answers to open-ended questions. The data for the latter three studies were collected through two original surveys with a population consisting of adult residents of the Netherlands. The guiding theoretical lens was a synthesis of dominant conceptualizations of interpersonal risk talk from both theory and empirical research: a social process of meaning-making and norm negotiation on the one hand, and an avenue for information seeking and sharing on the other.

## 6.2 Painting a Picture of Risk Talk

The four research articles included in this dissertation together paint a well-rounded picture of interpersonal risk talk as predominantly a social phenomenon. Interpersonal risk talk is an important process of social meaning-making, norm negotiation, and emotional support as well as a catalyst for practical support. Interpersonal risk talk takes various forms depending on the type of risk, in large part depending on whether a risk falls under individual, collective, or institutional responsibility, as well as how the balance between the risk and its associated benefits is socially perceived. Finally, interpersonal risk talk has its primary locus among people with strong ties such as friends and family.

Chapter 2 demonstrated that risk talk and risk perception are associated, but in non-linear ways. Findings indicated that risk talk may enhance whichever attitudes are present prior to the conversation: conversations including interlocutors with high risk perception lead to even higher risk perceptions among the participants, whereas conversations among individuals with low risk perception seemingly stabilize low risk perceptions. Furthermore, the chapter provided early suggestions that different risks lead to different risk talk outcomes. That is, risk talk may be used differently depending on hazard characteristics.

Chapter 3 unveiled people's preferences in terms of risk talk interlocutors, thereby providing insights into which social arenas may be more conducive to risk talk. Specifically, people prefer talking about risk to others, to whom they are close as well as to family and friends over colleagues. They also prefer risk talk as an exchange of information over more socially oriented motives.

Chapter 4 confirmed the suggestion in Chapter 2 that risk talk is dependent on hazard characteristics by showing that people are more prone to engaging in risk talk when the risk in question has not been normalized in society. In addition, the study found tentative signs that people's willingness to engage in risk activities may precede their risk perception, meaning that risk perception could, to some extent, be a reflection of social norms surrounding the activity in question rather than a predictor of such norms.

Chapter 5 provided a preliminary interpretive framework for many of the findings of the previous chapters. Specifically, it was found that risk talk varies considerably depending on the collectivity vis-à-vis individuality of the responsibility for the risk as well as its impact. This finding is interesting, as it aligns to some extent with the psychometric paradigm of risk perception research (Slovic, 1987). The psychometric paradigm has demonstrated that risk perception differs depending on characteristics of the risk in question, including dimensions such as voluntariness and controllability. While the dimensions inductively identified in Chapter 5 of this dissertation are slightly different, the finding that risk talk varies qualitatively depending on risk type nevertheless aligns well with the psychometric paradigm. Together with the findings of Chapter 4, this thus provides a meaningful interpretation of the variations seen in the association between risk talk and risk perception outlined in Chapter 2. Future research should investigate whether the dimensions of the psychometric paradigm can more accurately capture the variations in risk talk found in Chapter 5. Alternatively, future research may consider whether responsibility and impact have a place in the psychometric paradigm. The first type of risk talk identified in Chapter 5 concerned risks falling under collective responsibility. These tend to prompt interpersonal risk talk in the form of social meaning-making—likely in no small part due to a high degree of uncertainty. Relevant conversations in the data of Chapter 5 concerned risks such as epidemics, climate risk, and pollution. People try to collectively bridge the uncertainty by arriving at a common interpretation, align values, and arrive at a shared strategy. Considering the findings of Chapter 4, this type of risk talk is thus likely to be a reciprocal and collaborative process of negotiation rather than a unidirectional process as often posited by strands of risk perception research drawing on Social Influence

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Theory.

Risks falling under individual responsibility often coincide with risks that are normalized in society. These risks tend to lead to risk talk in the form of advice sharing and giving emotional and practical support. Notably, people often engage in interpersonal risk talk to voice their worries and frustrations, either with the uncertainty associated with the risk, with their inability to mitigate the risk, or with the insufficiency of institutional responses. Risks pertinent to this form of risk talk include lifestyle risks—people may express their frustration with their own inability to successfully change their habits— or risks of physical injury or illness such as arthritis or certain cancers. In the case of a perceived insufficient institutional response, risks may include environmental risks or food safety risks. Chapter 3 found that people prefer talking about risk to others, to whom they are close; the notion of risk talk as an emotional regulation tool contextualizes this, as research shows emotional regulation through conversation to be more effective when done with close contacts (Christenfeld et al., 1997; Gable et al., 2018). As such, it is likely that this form of risk talk is salient in people’s minds.

In contrast to these findings, risk talk as an information seeking avenue only found limited support. Chapter 3 showed that people prefer knowledgeable interlocutors, and Chapter 4 showed that people who consider themselves knowledgeable on a risk topic are also more ready to engage in risk talk, indicating that people are both more comfortable talking about risk when they believe themselves to be knowledgeable and perceive it as an information exchange avenue. Nevertheless, Chapter 5 showed that people only actively sought out information through conversation to a minor extent—a finding, which is supported by previous research (Jacobs et al., 2017; Morton & Duck, 2001; Volkman et al., 2014). Rather, when information sharing occurred, it was often a byproduct of risk talk centered on other aims. That is, people might initiate a conversation to vent and receive information and advice from loved ones. Nevertheless, advice, as described by respondents, was more commonly given in the form of suggestions for how to tackle a problem rather than new information as such. Taken together, it is likely that there is some discrepancy between people’s perceptions of interpersonal risk talk and the actual phenomenon, and that this discrepancy may have been the source of the prevalence of the conceptualization of risk talk as an information avenue within risk perception research.

### 6.3 Theoretical Contributions

The research in this dissertation has positioned risk talk as a foundational mechanism in the social construction of risk, by which individuals consolidate risk information with, and utilize risk communication for, personal and group-level goals, values, and lifestyles. This interpretation has consequences for the interpretation of existing risk talk research and helps highlight areas in which more research is needed.

Risk communication research, as exemplified by the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), has historically considered risk talk a pathway through which risk information travels and is amplified or attenuated. And, while Kasperson et al. (1988) stress that the word amplification should be taken to mean both qualitative and quantitative transformations of risk—qualitative here referring to non-quantifiable changes in meaning and interpretation—existing literature has primarily focused on the quantitative transformations, i.e., whether risk perception increases or decreases—and, to some extent, the role of trust in this context (Bearth & Siegrist, 2022; J. X. Kasperson et al., 2003). This dissertation shows, however, that risk talk cannot and should not be reduced to a quantitative amplification station of risk information. Rather, while risk talk undoubtedly has the potential to amplify or attenuate risk quantitatively, it does so through more subtle mechanisms than the metaphorical stereo receiver of Kasperson et al. (1988), which intensifies, weakens or filters signals. This dissertation shows that risk talk itself may be amplified or attenuated depending on interlocutor and risk characteristics (Chapters 3 and 4), and that risk talk differs qualitatively depending on the characteristics and existing mental models of the people talking as well as the characteristics of the risk in question (Chapter 5).

The dissertation brings further nuance to the study of risk talk as a mechanism of social information processing. Frameworks such as the Cognitive Mediation Models and the Impersonal Impact Hypothesis implicitly treat risk talk primarily as a mechanism of information exchange. Nevertheless, the motivations people have for engaging in risk talk, as well as the outcomes they experience, span across a much broader scope. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, social and relational goals seem to be more prevalent than information exchange as a motivation. This, then, leads to the question of how the motivation behind risk talk shapes the framing, the conversational dynamics, and the outcome. That is, while risk information may flow through interpersonal networks to some extent, it is unlikely to do so without specific framings. These framings might be determined, not necessarily by risk beliefs but by the values and goals of the people doing the talking. In order to understand how risk information is processed at the

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individual and interpersonal level, we must investigate risk talk as a contextualized phenomenon.

A key contribution of the dissertation is its engagement with the role of motivations and agency in the context of risk talk. In Chapter 4, it was demonstrated that people are indeed more likely to talk about risk when the mental models needed to interpret that risk are absent or precarious, suggesting that people use risk talk as an uncertainty reduction strategy. Chapter 5, in addition, demonstrated how people engage in risk talk for a variety of reasons, often with specific emotional and relational goals in mind, empirically corroborating social psychological theories, such as Social Representations Theory (SRT) and Identity Processing Theory (IPT). Nevertheless, these findings also highlight limitations in terms of the ability of existing theoretical approaches to address the entire phenomenon of risk talk. Specifically, neither these social psychological approaches nor the field of risk communication engage to any major extent with the topic of agency within risk talk. To clarify, risk communication research—especially in the case of models such as the Social Amplification of Risk Framework—centers around the communication itself, with the individuals communicating being analytically secondary. Meanwhile, SRT and IPT center around the “complex interacting system[s] of beliefs, which [underpin] risk appreciation and decision making” (Breakwell, 2010, p. 860), but do not explicitly theorize the decision-making itself as it is experienced and carried out by the individuals it concerns. The findings of Chapter 5, in particular, highlight how not only beliefs, but personal agendas and goals are important elements of people’s risk talk behavior. That is, risk talk is being used for, among other things, identity signaling and relational work, and further uses, such as social control, are similarly plausible. Consequently, while neither social psychological conceptualizations of risk talk nor the field of risk communication inherently aim to explain the entire phenomenon of risk talk, this dissertation has demonstrated that the respective emphases of these fields have resulted in questions of motivation and agency having been hitherto overlooked. Ultimately, then, this dissertation highlights the importance of understanding motivation and agency in a risk talk context in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of risk talk as an endogenous phenomenon.

In summary, this dissertation has paid much-needed attention to the qualitative amplification of risk in the context of risk talk. It has investigated which interlocutor and risk characteristics are conducive to risk talk, and it has laid the groundwork for research into the active use of risk talk by exploring people’s motivations and the outcomes they perceive. It has thereby systematically connected conceptualizations of risk talk originating in different fields. Future risk talk research should continue to

examine the conditions shaping risk talk, the role of agency, and how social strategies might shape the nature and outcome of risk talk.

## 6.4 Methodological Contributions

This dissertation sought to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative strands of risk talk research. Several complementary methods were used, which all had in common that they struck a balance between conceptual richness and some level of external validity. These studies, then, demonstrate that interpersonal risk talk, while a less straightforward object of study than, for instance, media effects, is nevertheless possible to investigate without disregarding its complex nature. Using conjoint analysis and structural equation modeling, respectively, Chapters 3 and 4 both utilized quantitative methods with substantial room for complexity. Chapter 5 applied a qualitative approach—thematic analysis—to a large number of short texts, and, consequently, the identified trends are highly likely to be also found in the broader Dutch population. These methods thus position themselves close to the boundary between qualitative and quantitative approaches, thereby strengthening the opportunities for cross-boundary communication and integration.

From a study-specific point of view, this dissertation also contributes with innovation to the field. Specifically, Chapter 3 demonstrates the novel use of conjoint analysis outside a scenario of clear decision-making. While previous use of conjoint analysis within the social sciences tends to focus mainly on concrete decision-making scenarios (Gutmann et al., 2025)—often as an indicator of potential voting behavior or policy preferences (Horiuchi et al., 2018; van der Does & Kantorowicz, 2021)—Chapter 3 of this dissertation is novel in studying preferences as drivers of social trends in scenarios that are often not entirely within the control of the people involved. As anyone who has ever had a conversation can testify to, conversations rarely play out in a linear manner and often go down unanticipated avenues or take surprising turns. Nevertheless, conversations rarely touch upon topics that the people involved have no interest in, and when they do, those involved tend to reorient the conversation (Maynard, 1980; Morris-Adams, 2016). As such, people’s preferences are ultimately informative in terms of how social scenarios play out, even if these do not contain concrete decision-making scenarios. This study, then, opens new avenues for the utilization of conjoint analysis outside of the realm of decision-making.

Chapter 5 demonstrates the potential value of applying qualitative analysis to large-scale textual datasets. The large number of responses provides detailed insights

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into a wide variety of scenarios that can be reasonably assumed to play out in similar ways in the broader population. Conducting a full thematic analysis on such material remains extremely resource-intensive, which has historically limited the scope of qualitative inquiry in survey-based research. Nevertheless, the proliferation and constant improvement of large language models (LLMs) create new opportunities for such large-scale qualitative analyses. Prior to embarking on the analysis of Chapter 5, I piloted an LLM-assisted coding workflow to investigate the current possibilities of this utilization of LLM. While the analysis unfortunately required too high a degree of abstract inference for the LLM to be able to produce meaningful output at the time of analysis, LLM-supported analysis on more surface-level topic matter has already seen the light of day (Dai et al., 2023; Sharma & Wallace, 2025). With the constant improvement of generative AI models, large-scale LLM-supported qualitative analysis even on more demanding abstract content is thus likely to be on the horizon.

## 6.5 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This dissertation was subject to limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. A key goal of this dissertation was to capture interpersonal risk talk beyond the usual operationalizations measuring frequency and valence and, to the extent possible, without relying on artificial conversational scenarios that detract from the informality of everyday talk. This, however, ruled out the use of experimental designs that included actual conversations, since such conversations would hold low mundane realism. Instead, I chose to measure behavioral intention, i.e., intention to engage in risk talk, for both Chapters 3 and 4. As is well-known, however, intentions do not always manifest in behavior (Sheeran & Webb, 2016). Future research may need to choose whether to focus on causal inference or mundane realism. A pertinent question in terms of causality is the potential mediation chain suggested by Chapter 4: perceptions of the normalization of a risk are transformed into private attitudes before being reflected in risk talk proclivity, first by affecting behavioral intentions and then by subsequently impacting risk perception. If the prevalence of risky behavior precedes its social processing, interpersonal risk talk becomes a process of collective post-rationalization rather than a process of norm negotiation. Future research should explicitly test this causal pathway to determine whether post-rationalization is an important element of interpersonal risk talk.

The empirical work of this dissertation draws exclusively on a sample of Dutch adult residents. Consequently, while similar trends may be found in other Western

European countries, the trends found in this dissertation should not be generalized too far beyond this context. That is, child and adolescent risk talk may look different, as may risk talk within other cultures. Some studies have demonstrated that the relationship between interpersonal risk talk and risk perception differs between US and Chinese populations (Han et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2021); it is thus likely that the studies of this dissertation would also see different results if conducted with different populations. Conversational norms, differing perceptions of the relationship between the individual and the collective, and notions of self-efficacy in a health context may all contribute to such differences.

The research in this dissertation encompassed a broad range of risks. Since the concrete risks differed between Chapters 3 and 4—and especially with the variations in risk talk depending on risk type, as documented in Chapter 5, in mind—conclusions based on the synergy between Chapters 3 and 4 should be considered tentative. Extrapolations from Chapter 3 to non-health-related risks and from Chapter 4 to non-lifestyle risks should also only be made with caution.

Future research should also investigate the alignment between the role of perceived responsibility and risk talk type, on the one hand, and the psychometric paradigm, on the other. By understanding how psychological perception of risk connects to interpersonal communication, researchers will be better equipped to account for interactions between psychological and social factors when creating models for predicting risk perception and behavior, and communicators will be able to tailor their communications with such interactions in mind. Future studies could collect data on interpersonal risk talk in conjunction with psychometric dimensions of the risks in question and compare risk talk between these dimensions. In addition, the dimensions of responsibility and impact were inductively derived but should be explicitly tested in future research.

Finally, the role of interpersonal risk talk as a means of emotional regulation needs attention. An important question in this regard is how risk perception is affected by such a conversation. That is, when a conversation centers around calming the fears of an individual, does the risk perception of that individual increase or decrease, and for how long? Furthermore, such conversations may prompt qualitative changes to people's attitudes toward the risk in question. For instance, depending on the topic, such a conversation may prompt people to value the benefits of the hazard more in spite of the risks, or they may conclude that their high risk perception was, in fact, a product of their anxious personality and consequently change their approach to risk management in general.

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## 6.6 Implications and Advice

The research shows that interpersonal risk talk is predominantly a mechanism for meaning-making and support exchange rather than an information avenue. These findings call into question the suitability of models such as the Cognitive Mediation Model or the Health Belief Model from the point of view of risk talk. While these models are still suitable when studying the dissemination of information specifically, they are much less suitable when studying social changes in attitude—in this context, risk perception in the public—as the mechanisms at work in the context of attitude change only concern information exchange to a limited extent. Quantitative risk researchers should keep in mind that risk talk is not a uniform construct, but rather a socially situated practice that is shaped by relationships, context, and the qualitative perception of the risk in question. While reductionism is often necessary for modeling, it is important to stay aware that oversimplifying can obscure the underlying social processes; depending on the aim of the study, researchers should thus incorporate the complexity of the real-world phenomenon to the furthest practical and appropriate extent.

As this dissertation demonstrates, methodological pluralism is one potential avenue of maintaining complexity and obtaining a multifaceted picture of the object of study in question. That is, by approaching the object of study from several different angles, both in terms of the methods applied and the operationalization of key constructs (e.g., intention, observed behavior, rationalization of behavior), one may arrive at a level of detail and contextual sensitivity that approaches the richness typically associated with quantitative research, while maintaining the benefits in of generalizability associated with quantitative approaches.

Finally, the combination of rich quantitative approaches and large-scale qualitative analysis demonstrates one possible avenue for linking micro- and macro-levels of research. Until now, such analyses have been few and far between due to the amount of labor required. With the current proliferation of LLM-supported analysis and other computational analytical approaches, however, new and groundbreaking opportunities to create such linkages are on the horizon.

While the findings of this dissertation are thus predominantly conceptual rather than prescriptive, practitioners within risk communication can nevertheless derive value from increased awareness of the workings of interpersonal risk talk. Recent research has highlighted the importance of understanding audience reception of risk communication (e.g., Ademolu, 2023; Mazepus & Rimkutė, 2026; Rimkutė & Maze-

pus, 2025). Practitioners may thus benefit from recognizing interpersonal risk talk as part of the communication environment and by anticipating the potential effects it may have on aggregate risk perception and behavior, even if such effects are not yet clear. In addition, by engaging with and taking an interest in everyday risk talk, practitioners may better understand how risk communication is collectively received and processed in the population. While not under the umbrella of risk talk as defined by this dissertation, surveilling public discussions online might be a starting point for understanding social risk construction in the population.

The findings also suggest that policy makers and communicators may encourage sense-making processes by creating opportunities for open, peer-to-peer discussion. The fact that people prefer close contacts when discussing risks further suggests that such interventions may work best when they leverage existing trust networks. These findings, then, provide further evidence of the effectiveness of risk communication approaches that mobilize community leaders and local opinion leaders (see also Kelly et al., 1997; Oyo-Ita et al., 2021).

## **6.7 Closing Statement**

The findings of this dissertation highlight that risk perception and communication cannot be fully understood without considering the everyday conversations through which they unfold. Interpersonal risk talk emerges as a central mechanism for the social processing of risk, encompassing acts such as collective meaning-making and norm negotiation, emotional and practical support, and emotional regulation. By addressing interpersonal risk talk as an independent object of study and from multiple methodological angles, it has served to bring together the rich conceptualization of qualitative research and theories of social construction on the one hand, and the role of risk talk within the larger context of laypeople risk perception and behavior on the other. It shows the value for risk perception research to attribute more weight to the meaning-making function of interpersonal risk talk—as opposed to its information dissemination function—as well as its role as a mechanism of emotional regulation and support. Paying attention to everyday interpersonal risk talk grounds risk perception in the lived experience of the people it belongs to.

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