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RISK BEHAVIOR OF YOUTH – SOCIAL DEFINITION OF RISK

Abstract

Social defining of the risk behaviors is rooted in a diverse, multidimensional world of norms, values, rituals and discourses. Including social contexts of engaging in the risk behaviors and production of knowledge about them allowed us to go beyond standard cause-and-effect descriptions and examine these actions as an essential element of everyday practices and rituals of youth. The aim of this paper was to analyze the risk behaviors of youth in the framework of sociological categories of risk, reflexivity and interactional order. The paper is based on the results of the qualitative study conducted within the project “Problem Behaviors of Youth – Study in the Opole Region 2019–2020,” that attempted to capture the ways of defining and explaining the risk behaviors by the school youth, teachers and counselors. Such a sociological perspective bridges the gap in the prevention scholarship connected to insufficient attention paid to social ways of defining and meaning making connected to the risk behaviors of youth.

Keywords: youth, risk behavior, prevention, sociology of risk

Introduction

This qualitative study was conducted within the project entitled “Problem Behaviors of Youth – Study in the Opole Region 2019–2020” conducted in cooperation with the Plenipotentiary of the Opole Voivodship Board for Prevention and Solving Dependency Problems (Deutschmann, Piejko-Płonka, Trościanka, Wanke, Zawora 2020). Its goal has been to acquire detailed knowledge of the contexts of risk behaviors undertaken by youth

(15–18 years old) in order to complement the data used for shaping the prevention in the region, acquired periodically in the survey study ESPAD (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs).

The aim of this paper is to reintegrate the sociological categories of risk and reflexivity with the empirical results of the studies on youth about risk behaviors. We point to the differences between the current discourse about risk behavior of youth and their definitions constructed by the youth themselves. Using three types of conceptualizations of risk – as an immanent attribute of modernity, but also as socially constructed and imposed by the hegemonic discourses – we contextualize the reflexive attitudes of youth towards risk behaviors. In line with the purpose of the study, the intellectual goal of this paper is to provide arguments for practice and prevention, in order to include social ways of defining and social meanings of the risk behavior of youth.

Sociology of risk – from the risk society to the interaction rituals

From the sociological perspective risk is inseparably associated with cultural and social norms because it is socially defined, and the undertaking of risk by individuals is constrained by a strong moral judgment. Deborah Lupton (2006) distinguishes three streams of conceptualizing risk in sociology and anthropology, calling them, respectively, approaches of “the risk society,” “cultural/symbolic” and “governmentality.” In the first approach, that was proposed by the scholars of later modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck 1998, 2009), the risk is real, existing objectively, as a result of the advanced interference of humans in nature and, more broadly, of modernization. The paradoxes of the rationality of late industrial society generate a sense of insecurity in individuals, who in turn are, to some extent, responsible for dealing with this fear inside of their identity project. In the second approach, that can be derived from the works of Mary Douglas (Douglas, Wildavsky 1983), the attention is directed towards the definitions of risks – especially by communities, in order to sustain the cohesion and stability of groups – and demarking boundaries of deviation and violation of norms. In the third approach, that can be drawn from the works of Michel Foucault, is the concept of governmentality: those in power define the limits of the risk that can be taken by individuals, which in a way shifts the responsibility for auto-regulation that enables the avoidance of risk, both outside of the individual as well as induced by themselves. Sociological definitions of risk operate hence on the epistemological spectrum: from objectivity, through intersubjectivity towards the structural relation of power and discursive description of risk.

The cited approaches help explain the social reception of risk and its discursive construction. They are not, however, that useful when considering independent generation of risk by individuals. Obviously, the constructivist paradigm of Mary Douglas provides the basic argument for learning the definitions of risk behavior by individuals themselves, and in a similar manner, the Foucauldian perspective allows one to critically distinguish these individual definitions from the ones that are universally accepted

and from the schematic patterns imposed from the top. These theoretical constructs do not allow one, however, to grasp the individual and social motivations for individuals to undertake risk behaviors because they focus on external threats in the area of the natural environment, health or technological development.

On the other hand, in some sociological studies on people's undertakings of risk and, as it stands to reason, its definition, according to the assumptions of the constructivist paradigm, it was found that the informants pointed to the inevitable role of risk taking in their lives (Lupton, Tulloch 2002). First of all, risk taking facilitates a sort of change, a deviation from the beaten path and life progress defined as individual achievements of the identity project. Secondly, risk taking is associated with intensification of emotions, excitement or effervescence. Naturally, this ought to be conceptually combined with the theories of social ritualization and the creation of group solidarity in the Durkheimian spirit. Randall Collins (2005) stresses the role of the synchronization of emotions, and in the chapter of his book devoted to tobacco smoking, he even indicates its totemic character. Risk taking is hence not merely a pleasurable adventure (see Naezer 2018), but it has a socially determined function – it is a ritual building community and belonging. Third in this regard, the risk in everyday life is taken against one's own body, which enables individuals to set the boundaries of control over it. Paradoxically then, by trespassing the limits of safety, risk behaviors define the range of control over one's own body and basically over oneself.

Risk behaviors – interaction of individual and social factors

In the prevention discourse, the contemporary understanding of risk behaviors emphasizes their processual and holistic character. The focus is not on the single action anymore, but instead of the set of mutually connected behaviors whose undertaking has negative implications, both for the individual and their social surroundings. The set of risk behaviors discussed by the researchers and the practitioners goes beyond the so-called developmental norm characteristic for adolescence and, as such, requires a broader psychosocial outlook. The extension of the definition of risk behaviors to include this social context is not merely connected with the search for causes outside of the individual, but first and foremost it allows an approach to the risk behaviors as an essential component of the everyday practices and rituals of youth.

The behaviors of youth breaching the current norms and incurring negative consequences are described in psychological models as undesirable behaviors, problem behaviors, risk behaviors or antisocial behaviors. Each of these concepts is connected to a different cause and effectively yields different prevention measures. In a classical theory of the problem behavior by Richard Jessor and Shirley Jessor, the authors made an assumption that the behaviors of youth are treated as “problematic” if the adolescents do not respect the requirements and expectations for their age group, and hence this “problematic” character is no longer a case once they become adults (Jessor, Jessor 1977;

Ostaszewski 2014). Then the parental power of the adults no longer constitutes the main framework that sets the boundaries between the conventional and problem behavior. Initially, Jessor and Jessor used the term *problem behaviors*, but in the model modified in the 1990s, Richard Jessor uses the term *risk behaviors*, stressing that they are a result of an interaction of the individual and environmental factors, some of which act as catalysts of the behaviors and some of which minimize the probability of their undertaking (Jessor based his analysis on, among others, Robert Merton's concept of *anomie*). Identification of risk factors and protective factors became the goal of research from then on.

Risk itself does not necessarily carry a negative connotation; on the contrary, it involves a comparative analysis of occurrence of both positive and negative consequences. Risk assessment is associated with the cognitive processes on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is connected to the psychosocial skills and cultural competences.

Assumption of the sociocultural perspective allowed *ipso facto* interpretation of risk behaviors in the context of the identity processes, lifestyles of the youth, community building, group solidarity and satisfying social needs. Drawing attention to the gains one can obtain by realizing the risk behavior and to socio-cultural conditions, constituted a turning point in the discussion about the vision and methods of prevention. Norms and conventional values remain components of the theoretical models, as a reference point for the risk behaviors, but the change in the way of defining them opened a field for interdisciplinary research oriented towards capturing different paths of development, adaptation of children and adolescents, strategies of coping with the challenges of everyday life and expectations of the social environment. Developed in the 1980s, the concept of *resilience* underlines even more vividly the necessity of including the entanglement of disadvantageous external conditions, such as traumatic events, social inequalities, social pressure and stress when considering risk behaviors. The attention of scholars was re-directed from the factors leading to undertaking the undesired actions onto the factors making some young people develop correctly amid unfavorable external conditions.

According to the researchers developing this paradigm, “resilience is what interrupts the path leading from the risk factors to the problem behaviors or psychopathology” (Borucka, Ostaszewski 2008), and by doing so it facilitates grasping the complex processes of coping with crossing boundaries, emphasizing adaptive capabilities (positive adaptation) and the role of psychosocial competencies of individuals as well as the role of the relationship with the social surrounding. Additionally, the introduction of the concepts of *family resilience* and *community resilience*, as well as development of the ecological models and the ecosystemic theories, demonstrates that in the research of risk behaviors of youth it is essential to move beyond the individual and capture the phenomena and processes connected to the human entanglement in local communities and broader processes, that is, social, political, cultural and economic ones, associated with experiencing difficulties or adversity. The social circumstances are included in the prevention discourse, but mostly as a methodological strategy, allowing expansion of the map of risk factors and protective factors, and not as an explanatory framework for the course and meaning of the risk behavior of youth.

If we assume that the risks and also these ones associated with the risk behaviors as defined by the prevention discourse undergo both of the aforementioned social processes (or: on the one hand, the youth themselves define what is risk, while those who govern, embodied in school, family, society or dominating discourses, define them differently; and on the other hand, the very risk taking and trespassing the boundaries is important for the identity and group belonging), then it is unproductive to condemn, punish, chase or warn the youth. Probably, an investment of energy in understanding them, and, in line with the paradigm currently dominating the scholarship, in the reduction of harm.

Method qualitative group interviews

The research aim was to recognize and describe how to define and explain risk behaviors by school youth, teachers and school educators. It required us to look at youth problems from different positions and perspectives: pupils, teachers and school educators – seen as experts who come into contact with such problems in their everyday practice. It was essential to understand interviewees' comprehension of risk behaviors and contextualization, processuality and ascribing meanings. It is required to go beyond standard cause-effect descriptions of risk behaviors and place them in a much more complicated context of everyday youth practices. Such an approach permits us to consider topics, which would be impossible to explore if the research were quantitative, and was also utilized for ethical reasons (for example, auto-destructive behaviors and sexual life discussion of which is a sensitive topic).

The study was qualitative. Its participants were school youths, 15–18 years old, studying in secondary schools in the Opole Voivodship, and their teachers, school educators and tutors working in similar types of schools. Because of practical, logistic, and substantive considerations (possibility to grasp group processes), it was decided to conduct seven focus group interviews (FGI; including six with pupils and one with teachers), namely moderated interviews using the interview scenario. Thanks to that, it was possible to realize these interviews with youth in schools during their classes. The schools were chosen based on characteristic features of districts of their placement. Based on the Local Data Bank, districts with highly positive and highly negative indicators were identified. In the analysis, specific indicators were taken into consideration: labor market (registered unemployed out of work for longer than a year as a percentage of the economically active population), salary (the average salary in relation to the national average), arts and culture (entertainment, artistic, interdisciplinary, and sports events – number of events organized in 2018, and the number of members of associations, sections and clubs), physical culture (exercising in sports clubs up to 18 years of age), migration (the balance of internal migrations per 1,000 inhabitants and the balance of international migrations per 1,000 inhabitants), social welfare (the number of benefits allocated due to domestic violence, the number of benefits allocated due to alcoholism, the number of benefits allocated due to drug addiction and the districts'

expenditure on social assistance), judiciary (crimes identified by the police in total per 1,000 inhabitants, crimes identified by the police that were committed against family and dependents per 1,000 inhabitants, crimes identified by the police against life and health per 1,000 inhabitants, attempted suicide due to family disagreements, domestic violence and suicide attacks at the age of 13–18), education (students per single class in general education schools), population (old age index [relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, i.e. the number of people aged 65 and more per 100 people aged 0–14]). Finally, three districts were selected with significantly positive and particularly negative characteristics, then schools from capitals of selected districts were selected.

The interview scenario consisted of technical and substantive instruction for the moderators and was modified at the various stages of the study. Some of these modifications were implemented with careful consideration (based on the previous interviews and continuous evaluation of the tool), and some of them were implemented *ad hoc* due to the unpredictable situations that emerged during the interviews. However, the underlying structure of the research tool was the same during the whole project. It consisted of questions about definitions of risk behaviors from the perspective of interviewees (depending on the interviewed pupils' perspective or teachers' perspective), risk behaviors in the pupils' immediate environment, the co-occurrence of different types of risk behavior, and risk/protective factors concerning certain types of behaviors. Additionally, in the teachers' group, the influence of pupils' risk behaviors on school life was discussed.

The conducted interviews were recorded in digital audio format and later transcribed. In the transcriptions time marks were used, and round brackets for descriptions of the nonverbal elements of utterances (e.g. to mark a laugh or the tone of voice), sign == was used for the utterances of people speaking simultaneously. Interviews were marked with codes. The interview code takes the form NN-X-M, where NN is the number of the interview in the very same city, X indicates if it is the interview with the pupils (U) or with the teachers (N), M indicates the name of the city. For ethical reasons related to ensuring the anonymity of the respondents, it was decided to anonymize the city codes and assign random letters to specific places. The transcriptions were coded with the assistance of the Atlas.ti cloud software. According to grounded theory methodology (GTM) logic, the whole material had been coded first, but differently from classical approaches to coding strategies within GTM, in this case codes were based on the preliminary theoretical assumptions (Charmaz 2009). Codes were not predefined, but coders were looking for utterances related to specific thematic areas. Subsequently, according to the logic of inductive reasoning the categories were derived from the data analyzed, and more specific categories were created; they are used later in this text. In the course of the analysis, working research questions were posed:

- What behaviors of the youth should we consider to be risk behaviors?
- Who realizes such behaviors and in what contexts?

Based on the literature review the catalog of risk behaviors, usually mentioned by the researchers of this field, was created. In the catalog, we took into account such issues as:

smoking tobacco (including e-cigarettes), using alcohol, using drugs, digital problems and games, conflicts with the law, vandalism, aggression and violence (verbal, psychological, physical, relational, digital), truancy, gambling, use of slimming diets, use of anabolic steroids and shopaholism. According to the instruction from the interview scenario, moderators were starting the interview from the open question about examples of risk behaviors. Such a procedure aimed to check which behaviors interviewees consider to be and which not to be risky, and, consequently, to extend the preliminary catalogue of risk behaviors created on the basis of literature.

Defining risk behaviors – discrepancy of the perspectives

The student interviewees applied a twofold definition of the risk behavior – indicating simultaneously a double perspective – on the micro and the macro level, or one relating to the individual and the other referring to the broader social system. On the one hand, they pointed to the behaviors that are socially undesired, risky and potentially bearing negative consequences, as if they adhered to the definition assumed in this study. This is a social or macro perspective, that can be called the one of “governmentality.” On the other hand, though, they referred to the issues problematic for themselves, or behaviors, situations and patterns of risk behaviors that constitute trouble for the individual. The micro perspective, or “social/cultural” in this report, comprises the context and (usually) the risk factor for the other problem behaviors defined according to the former definition.

Smoking tobacco – interactivity and ambiguous harmfulness

Smoking tobacco is definitely a harmful and risk behavior. Highly addictive properties and terrible health effects of this substance are known and well described. As the subject of the state policy, smoking tobacco also causes other harms, first of all financial, and potentially legal and regulatory (selling tobacco to minor is forbidden, and the school regulations do not allow pupils to smoke). Prohibited for underage people and generally recognized as noxious, tobacco is also, to some extent, socially unaccepted, and its usage by youths is strictly regulated by a series of social norms. Educators and parents are the guards of these norms.

However, the opinions of informants on this subject are often quite different. Smoking is certainly not taboo for young people, and the collective behavior and experience in this area results in the readiness to express opinions. Many respondents downplay the harmfulness of smoking, pointing to the low social costs of this behavior. Here, students make comparisons to psychoactive substances that change the state of consciousness and do not share the opinion that they are harmful to health:

[S]moking is somehow not forbidden, it doesn't change anything in the behavior for example after smoking, so it's not a problem (01_U_N).

[A]s much as drugs, because they don't destroy your health that much and for example, I don't know, for the mental state it also doesn't influence that much, however indeed it is a problem (02_U_O).

Of course, these are not only voices in the discussion. Participants also manifested awareness of harmfulness and experiencing of burdensome smoking, including passive smoking:

Worse problem is the cigarette smoke and this passive smoking, when you stand with smokers, and research in Poland and in the world show, that it's more harmful than the smoking itself, and this passive smoker is more exposed. Everyone has access to passive smoking, but there are less people who are active smokers (01_U_N).

So we have an example of an ambivalent attitude towards smoking. Especially, because informants pointed out the social dimension of smoking tobacco. Cigarettes are smoked with somebody, optionally under somebody's pressure, or even *for* somebody – always in the social situation:

M: Why do young people smoke cigarettes?

S5: Well, to relieve, to find this calm.

S7: In my opinion to please somebody.

S5: Or to please somebody.

S4: Because it looks cool.

S5: There is also such a term, friendship just at the length of a cigarette. Or also, rather such a relief or gateway for example.

M: So problems again?

S5: So, but you know, for example one doesn't have enough friends, doesn't have such a gang... Like he wants, he sees that someone is smoking so he tries, like he joins them. Like, he makes new friends, you know.

S4: So, to tie oneself to the given group.

As Randall Collins (2004: 297) argued, interaction rituals, such as those connected to smoking cigarettes, set the limits of inclusion and exclusion. Collins underlines (2004: 305) ritual, ritual relaxation, ritual elegance and ritual sociability. Some young people, our informants, for whom smoking is a pretext for group affiliation, define smoking tobacco in a similar way.

Aware of the risk associated with smoking tobacco, some young people level it by using electronic cigarettes. It allows them to reduce the burden and the abstract fear of harming their own health, as well as the fear of crossing social prohibitions. This reflexive reaction allows them to keep the interactional character of smoking. Such processes are reflected in the results of quantitative research – the newest report from ESPAD points out the constant decrease in using and accepting cigarettes by young people in Europe,

but vaping (smoking electronic cigarettes) may constitute a renormalization of smoking (ESPAD Group 2020: 109).

Alcohol consumption – sociability device

In the case of alcohol, similarly as in the case of tobacco, many times in research the harmful and addictive properties have been proven. Also social norms and sanctions related to its use are similar to those of tobacco use. In Poland alcohol is legally available from the age of 18, so reaching this age excludes alcohol from the field of practices forbidden by law, and leaves it to a less formal system of social sanctions. In the world of youth, using alcohol before reaching maturity is not seen as definitely bad and not allowed. Drinking alcohol is tolerated, and even approved by a part of the environment. Being still strictly repressed by teachers and often by parents, it is received positively by peer groups. However, it is not true that youth evaluate alcohol only positively. There are norms about it in this group, and they are similar to the adults norms, which define the borders of its use. Occasional usage (just for taste) is differentiated from risk usage:

S5: There is a difference between people who drink sometimes just for taste, and people who drink in excess.

S1: Yeah, there are people, who just taste and it doesn't hurt them.

M: And youth taste or drink? ==

everyone: DRINK, DRINK (01_U_N).

Thus, by distinguishing between occasional (non-risky) and more intense (risky) use, students also confirm the well-known stereotype that alcohol use is widespread among adolescents. Using small amounts of alcohol is normalized as the element of everyday practice of many adults, and it is associated with positive social situations such as meeting with significant others, celebrating important family events, and other similar situations. Participants transfer such behaviors for their own practices of celebrating and treat alcohol instrumentally, as an element accompanying the party. There are a lot of occasions to use it, but there is a special place for the party institution. It is the category used by informants most often to describe the situation of alcohol usage and intoxication effects. Joint alcohol drinking, similarly as smoking tobacco, serves as the interaction ritual to set up the borders of inclusion and exclusion.

Using drugs – prevalence and precaution

Differently than cigarettes and alcohol, other psychoactive substances – collectively defined just for the purposes of this research as “drugs” – are separated from the everyday experience of informants by the barrier: the risk associated with their use and a much lower prevalence of direct and indirect experiences. This does not mean that their availability – potential – is high:

Nowadays it's not a problem to find anything, we live in times, when you can find everything on the web, and if not on the web, you can find somebody, who will arrange something, who can arrange (01_U_N).

Consciousness of availability online, but primarily through “social supply” and networking (Coomber, Moyle, South 2016). Despite the knowledge about the risk, normalization of drug usage occurs. Together with obtaining information about the risk, young people get data about its reduction or absence:

S6: Not everybody wants to try it, not everybody.

S1: People, who have awareness, do not take it, because they know that there are losses, that something will happen, that someone will get addicted (laughs in the background), and they are scared.

S6: You may even compare it to the situation a few years ago, there was this scandal with these designer drugs, in most cases it was about unconsciousness, because when later it went, when society was more conscious about these substances, the number of users decreased (01_U_N).

Active, discursive shifting the limits of concern and simultaneous access to the information is a challenge because it is incompatible with the legal status, and with socially binding norms. Unlike alcohol, which is clearly defined, psychoactive substances – drugs – are subject to subcultural negotiation.

Sexual behavior – universal (un)knowing

Sexual behaviors were one of the topics which we decided to skip in our talks with youths because of ethical considerations, which is why this topic was absent in the scenario of the interview. However, it turns out that the topic of sexuality is not taboo among youth, and it appeared in many interviews, even though it was not induced by the moderators. Sexuality, although repressed and kept silent (Foucault 1990 [1976]), is a topic that young people discuss willingly, although it arouses laughter and jokes among some. Teenagers find that sex is available and present everywhere:

Sex is more available. It seems to be excluded from the taboo, to be honest, because it is present everywhere. From advertisements to newspapers, not to mention the internet (01_N_K).

Nevertheless, sex and sexuality are generally treated as serious topics by adolescents, and they are aware of two dimensions of the consequences of engaging in sexual activity, namely, the risk of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Knowledge about sexuality, which young people need and seek, is problematic, because often there is nobody to turn to for it in their immediate environment. Therefore, they look for information on the internet, where it is easily available, although not always adequate to their needs. In addition, the internet is also associated with other risky sexual activities that were mentioned by the questioned students, such as sexting, that is, sending naked

photos to partners. The lack of a reliable source of knowledge about sex makes the internet the primary one. Low reflectivity and credulity towards the content found may lead to more frequent risk behaviors. It seems that this problem cannot be eliminated without introducing reliable sex education in schools.

Spots of risk behaviors – socio-material constructs

The analysis of the meanings attached to the places where the risk behaviors are conducted leads to a conclusion that they cease to matter only in physical and material fashion. In the interviews, the youth did outspokenly enumerate and name the places where the risk behaviors take place (school, home, outdoors, dorm, park or street), but they were quick to note that the exact spot is not what matters but the access to those social practices and networks of sociability. The spots are hence socio-material constructs with, on the one hand, the observable features connected to, among others, setting boundaries between the area of the school, home and the street, and on the other hand, drawing attention to the process of (re)construction and petrification of the interactional order. Such a meaning is according to Giddens (2013) one of the properties of modernity, when the interaction rituals requiring precisely determined time and space, are in the limelight. This is the meaning of spots the informants point to, when they use the term “everywhere”:

M: Outdoors? Do you have a specific spot? Like a space?

S1: Who hasn't [laughter].

S2: There are such spots everywhere, in every town, every community (01-U-0).

This response, given in chorus, amplified nonverbally by the shouts, head nodding and laughter indicates the experience of unlimited access to places that enable engaging in behaviors that are considered risky. The access to suitable space is not a requirement though, to undertake the risk behaviors. What is more important than the spot, is the occasion or situation facilitating such practices and it does not have to be any particular (full-dress) ceremony. On the contrary, any mundane interaction can potentially be good enough of an excuse.

Also, places conventionally considered free from the risk behaviors do not constitute an obstacle – on the contrary, they are sometimes perceived as a natural milieu for such practices. School, according to the informants, is one of such places:

M: And where the teens smoke? == EVERYWHERE THEY CAN.

S8: One can even go outside and smoke in front of the school during the break.

M: In front of the school? Isn't it a problem?

S1: Kind of you can't, cause there's the regulations, but it's not a big deal, it's not positive though.

The youth exchange the knowledge and experiences and recommend the spots where they can relatively safely smoke cigarettes or consume alcohol. Therefore, the map of such spots is constantly being updated and shared by the informal channels.

According to the informants, the characteristic feature of the risk behaviors is the fact that they are not tied to any physical spots, the more so, when we examine them in the context of the digital technologies and spaces. In the opinion of the youth the “universal” access to the internet translates itself into even higher accessibility to people, opportunities and knowledge. In their view, the internet is everywhere, and hence everyone can be involved in a risk situation at any given time, from any given place:

We have access pretty much everywhere. We deal with it everywhere, on the phone, laptop or a computer. Either at home or at school. It's everywhere. (...) Basically, also because of the fact we can find everything there, we rely on it (02-U-O).

The new way of experiencing space and time suspends its material form. As a result, the space exists as an arena, where many situations take place enabling youth to engage in different relationships and meet many of the human needs. It comes as no surprise then, that it is also where the youth undertakes the risk behavior. On the web, just like outside of it, the youth meets, mates, groups, talks and shares knowledge, opinions and experiences, but also stigmatizes and breaks the norms – formal and informal ones. The actions taken online can be similarly effective, despite the lack of direct co-presence.

An important property of the places where youth avoid engaging in problem behavior is that they do not provide a sense of security and discretion. This is why home itself is not a spot where youth undertakes such behaviors. It only becomes one where the probability of parental control becomes low. The absence of the adults, especially parents, is, in the opinion of the informants, key for the unobtrusive consumption of alcohol. It allows avoidance of sanctions, and this is why the youth manages time, space and presence of others quite efficiently, and as a result manages the risk in a reflexive way, making decisions about drinking alcohol for example:

M: And where does one not drink alcohol then? == With parents.

S6: With parents, cause we'll get in trouble == but when they are not at home (laughter) == especially that the old folks have the stuff (laughter, bustle, the topic induces a stir).

S1: But at homes they drink the least often, because then there is trouble (01-U-N).

S3: Violence. Where is it done? Behind the garages (02-U-P).

S5: It's best to do the e-cigarettes, because it makes the difference.

M: What is the difference?

S5: The discretion above all, because the youth uses it more and more because the parents won't smell it.

Especially the outdoors are among the spots ensuring discretion, including woods, parks, streets and corners with low traffic and of low probability of being “caught by the adults.” The sense of safe use of drugs or violence, or other risk behaviors, can be achieved

also through the situational context, or when the practices in question occur in special circumstances, such as school trips, birthday parties, proms and other school events. These occasions, according to the informants, lift the indiscretion of place. In this case, the identity construction of young people is associated with the necessity to consider the risk, including the ultimate failure or “being caught.” But even then, the youth is capable of making a sudden redefinition of norms and values treating the denunciation by the adults as a random component of the interactional order. The analysis shows that the youth uses the informal topography of spots efficiently identifying and defining the places where the risk behaviors can be undertaken. The informants claim there is no shortage of such spots and these practices are possible “practically everywhere.” This attitude is enforced by the experiences of acceptance of the risk behaviors and their situational character.

Conclusion – youth as experts

The youth are definitely “experts” of risk behaviors. It was established as a result of this qualitative exploration that knowledge about such behaviors is constructed in a dynamic way and it can be plotted on a continuum: from direct participation/experience, via indirect experience, to the mediated knowledge. The situations this knowledge refers to can be divided into those of which the youth has a direct knowledge, sometimes a “transparent” one, to the extent they pay no attention or do not even notice it (which might pose a challenge for researchers, since it is hard to cross the boundary of obviousness of the presence of the tobacco or alcohol in the lives of the youth), but also those which one knows from friends or from various media outlets. The youth also has unrestricted access to the spots that facilitate initiating risk behaviors. They are being “developed” spontaneously and *ad hoc*; it is hence impossible to lock them down or fence them off.

The participants of the study possess knowledge about the consequences of the problem behaviors and discuss them freely, referring both to the examples from the closest social milieu as well as the ones overheard or otherwise acquired via media. It is a myth that the youths are not aware of the outcomes of such behaviors. The students move quite efficiently through the issues of consequences and are able to name them, define them and profile them, in relation to people who have direct insight into a given situation or behavior.

The “risk society” as theorized by the scholars of late modernity includes: the advanced capitalism and its consequences, competition and obsession of the academic and extracurricular achievements, inaccessibility of career-making or “ends-meeting” parents, individualization and isolation, and most importantly the stress resulting from these issues. It is also about the anxiety induced by whether the youth would be accepted by their peers, and have their identity projects accepted alike. Amid those difficulties, young people react reflexively – they seek knowledge, actively talk and think about problems and respond to them. Some of the reactions are socially constructed as risky and stigmatized as such. The studied adolescents respond with their own definitions of these behaviors. They are complex, elaborate and significantly different to the definitions

upon which the experts' world operates – those that the educators, prevention workers or parents use. The youth are the ones who are experts, and this is how they deal with cultural disorientation and competing expert systems. This is how they react to the increasing uncertainty and the contradictions of rationalization.

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