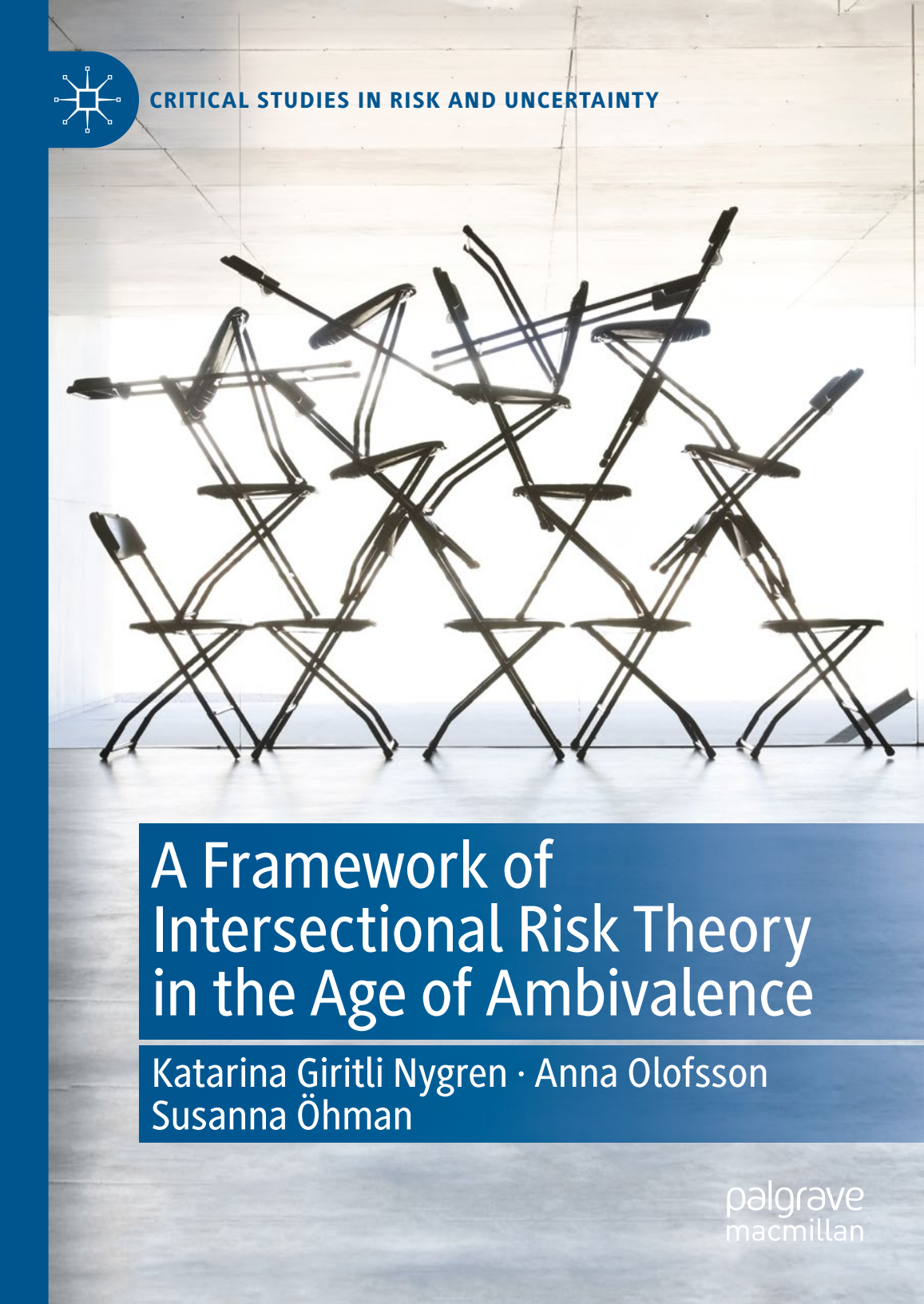

A Framework of Intersectional Risk Theory in the Age of Ambivalence

Katarina Giritli Nygren · Anna Olofsson
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The Age of Ambivalence

Introduction

This book brings feminist theories and concepts to the sociology of risk in an attempt to define intersectional risk theories in times of ambivalence. Why ambivalence? As Smart states: 'Ambivalence, both analytical and existential, is an understandable consequence of not knowing, and knowing that one cannot know for sure, precisely what will emerge from the various complex processes of restructuring through which modernity is continually (re)constituted. Late modernity, or the postmodern reconditioning of modernity, constitutes a form of social life in which ambivalence is pervasive' (Smart 1999, p. 11). This is a framework that embraces a critical perspective of ambivalence to unpack risk, conceptualising social as well as material artefacts in terms of risk and its relation to power. Therefore, the scope of the book is not to explain the world and everything observed within it through a few concepts or mechanisms. Rather, it seeks to define a frame, or frames, through which we can begin to deepen our understanding of certain phenomena, namely risk, power, and inequality, and to suggest a number of theoretical entry points to such analyses.

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A central perspective in this process is the feminist concept of intersectionality—that is, awareness of the simultaneity of multiple oppressions and privileges that are historically and contextually embedded. The outcome is a theoretical framework that we call intersectional risk theory, which seeks not only to contribute to the scientific understanding of risk and inequality but to provide tools for tracing cracks and openings in the fabric of power and for rethinking risk governance in contemporary society. Intersectionality as a concept was popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to account for the ways race, gender, and class intersect to position black women in particular ways vis-à-vis the law. From the first, intersectionality was thus strongly invested in the intersection of race, class, and gender and closely related to black feminism (see Hill Collins 2008; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). Today the concept of intersectionality has travelled far from its original field, and the insights it offers for understanding oppression are now used in diverse ways in different contexts. As with the notion of subjectivity, constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersectionality has emerged as the primary theoretical tool designed to interrogate hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity.

In this first chapter, we will set the scene for the book by introducing our view of ambivalence and then present a short overview of the book. Before we turn to ambivalence, there are a couple of other issues important to discuss and position ourselves against.

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that risk theories are drawn from, and in turn contribute to, a particularly Western conceptualisation of risk analysis that is progressive, evidence based, and rational, situated historically and socially within a post-Enlightenment tradition of modernity, postmodernity, and development discourse. Further, social science theorising and investigating risk are often deeply grounded in the enlightened history of the Global North; the approach deployed by the authors of this book is no exception. In addition, although understandings of risk have not developed along the same historical trajectory all around the world, the concept has been deployed universally. Both the development of understanding risk and

its deployment has happened through the imperialism of certain scientific practices and historical phases of colonialism, postcolonialism, and neocolonialism, which carry a progressive, scientific paradigm underpinned by an unchallenged assumption of objectivity (Desmond 2015). This leads us to question certain premises that expose the historical framing of risk as a construct of the post-Enlightenment Global North, given the necessary ambivalence of how concepts such as risk and uncertainty are applied, understood, and questioned in various contexts. Even though intersectional risk theory can be said to have developed from the standpoint of a 'Northern' perspective, our intentions are that the intersectional approach should help us to open the door to possible resignifications and to embrace ambivalence from a critical standpoint. Peggy Phelan (2003, p. 149) argues that in a world beset by fundamentalism, feminism foregrounds ambivalence as a necessary way of viewing the world—not as a sort of resigned pluralism or 'anything goes' but as a conscious approach or strategic positioning against fundamental power structures that define the world and 'know' it, causing contradictions and other interests, perspectives, and stories that also describe the world to be colonised and/or disappear. Moreover, by picking up what is relevant in intersectional theory for what we intend to do in this book we also appropriate the concept of intersectionality for the purpose of unpacking risk and its relation to oppressive structures and inequalities. In other words, in our search for new insights and understandings of risk we allow ourselves to select concepts and thinking within intersectional theory and critical research more broadly that we find relevant, rather than embracing the entire frameworks. For instance, although much research with an intersectional perspective problematises identity as identity politics, multiple identities, and identity work, we leave these elements more or less out in this book. This is also an example of how we use and define ambivalence as a theoretical method. Thus, this ambivalence allows us to see and so to conduct a dialogue amongst different types of knowledge or conversation, which permit multiple meanings. As such, ambivalence can also be viewed as a form of resistance towards reductionist and dogmatic epistemological views (Griffin et al. 2013).

Ambivalence as an Epistemological and Ethical Position

Although the concept of ambivalence is widely used in everyday speech and in various scientific fields, its meaning and usage seem to vary. Here, in a book whose title includes the word 'ambivalence', it seems appropriate to attempt to bring clarity to the concept in this context whilst at the same time pursuing theoretical coherence. One claim commonly made for ambivalence is that the concept reaches beyond dualistic ideas such as 'either/or' to favour thinking that includes 'both'. In so doing, it accommodates the simultaneous existence of conflicting ideas, which to us seems a productive way forward in studying risk. As the authors of this text, we might be understood as three individuals sharing the same view of risk or the same theoretical point of departure, which is not at all true. We have different and sometimes contradictory ways of viewing science and the world, and whilst this has sometimes been a source of difficulty in writing the book, it has also made us aware of the need of—as well as the benefit from—incorporating ambivalence in the study of risk.

Ambivalence was first advanced theoretically as a psycho(patho)logical concept by Eugen Bleuler at the beginning of the twentieth century to describe the presence of conflicting feelings or opposed impulses of the same intensity with respect to an object, as in the often-used example of eating or not eating (Stotz-Ingenlath 2000). This is also pertinent in terms of the perspective of an individual's ability to hate and love the same object; Bleuler says that ambivalence is the exception when a normal person is making decisions between contradictory values, but in a pathological situation these opposing feelings are not separated —love might be intensified and hate take the form of an exaggerated declaration of love. As something quite distinct from 'psychological ambivalence', Robert Merton and Elinor Barber (1976) introduced the term 'sociological ambivalence' in the 1960s. Here we start to see some of the things we find relevant for a theory of intersectional risk: Sociological ambivalence relates to the ways in which the relationship between individual/subjective and collective/structural identity generates conflicting frames, sometimes described as a pendulum moving between two more or less opposite

positions (Merton and Barber 1976). Ambivalence has subsequently been assimilated by other sociologists—for example in the field of risk studies, where the term is used to describe contingency, uncertainty, and the experiential and affective dimension of late modernity (see also Arribas-Ayllon and Bartlett 2014 and works by Mary Douglas 2001; Zygmunt Bauman 1990; Ortwinn Renn 2008; Ulrich Beck 1992, amongst others). In short, risk and uncertainty are linked in the sociology of risk, where ambivalence is often expressed in terms of reflexivity (Castells 1989) and social change both inside and outside the frame of modern (risk) society (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990; Lash 2003). We would like to develop this further by embracing the potential of ambivalence in the theorisation of risk and inequality.

We scrutinise risk theory for ambivalence and focus particularly on the work on reflexivity in order to develop this further. Reflexivity is an ambivalent concept and a recurring theme in Ulrich Beck's writings: Reflexivity is social self-confrontation in the face of ambivalence, as the ideals and technologies of the Enlightenment—not least the technologies of science and capitalism—have had catastrophic side effects and inconceivable consequences. In Beck's words, 'in risk society the unforeseeable side and after-effects … lead to what had been considered overcome, the realm of the uncertain, of ambivalence, in short, of alienation' (Beck et al. 1994, p. 10; cf. Bauman 1991). Whilst Habermas and Giddens in their discussion of reflexivity and late modernity object primarily to the determinism of structural functionalism and elaborate the dialectics between actor and structure, Beck and Lash instead consider reflexivity (ambivalence) to be the (only) characteristic of late modernity: the dissolution of dualism as well as dialectics. If theorists of modernity have assumed that the development of societies is linear, Beck et al. (1994) contend that late modern reflexivity is characterised by non-linearity, which can also be interpreted as a postmodern criticism of modernist theory (Lash 2003). In line with Beck, Horlick-Jones (2005) argues that, contrary to the present argument, the institutions of modernity, such as state, class, family, gender, and ethnicity are eroding; knowledge is characterised by uncertainty, and the subject is left making sense of risky technologies based on a bricolage of various discourses and norms related to the particular process

where knowledge and life prospects are uncertain (Lash 2003). The important point, however, is that Beck—as well as Lash and Latour (1993), although from different standpoints—can be seen as amongst those theorists seeking to overcome the linearity of the Enlightenment (and therefore dualism), based on knowledge claims that read the world as ambivalent (Lash 2003). This is promising, but we search for a more critical perspective, and therefore, move on to poststructural thinking.

In critical theory—not least in feminist research as we already pointed out—the concept of ambivalence has acquired an explicit epistemological meaning in relation to how we understand the relationship between experience and discourse, agency and structure. What connects the sociological and epistemological meanings of ambivalence is that both emphasise a sort of embodied link between classic dualities such as body–soul, agent–structure, and individual–society. This is also a question of ethics, leading to another key dimension of ambivalence. Zygmunt Bauman (1990), perhaps the leading advocate of this approach, has commented at length on the necessity of ambivalence, especially in relation to issues of ethics and morality. The Enlightenment's promises of a completely manageable and demystified world have not come to fruition; instead, despite the fact that there are some risks that have been reduced, there is an idea that the Western world is under constant threat, which is all the more frightening because of the threats' fluidity and elusiveness. As the carrier of Enlightenment ideals, the modern project has yielded an aporetic and ambivalent moral code. Aporia here pertains to a conflict, for example between right and wrong, to which there is no solution; and the situation is ambivalent in that doubt and insecurity are constant features of life. This brings ambivalence to the interpersonal level, and in a number of Bauman's texts (see e.g. 1991, 1995) a key theme is the idea ethically defensible actions in the presence of the other. Bauman's postmodern ethics cannot be considered a new moral code but rather a discussion of the problems of using an either-or moral code, wherein any action is either wright or wrong, or people are either good or evil. Bauman argues that we must, once and for all, acknowledge the ambivalence and uncertainty of ethics and move beyond modernistic attempts to find a uniform moral code in the absence of a god. In this way, the acceptance and

welcoming of ambivalence also represent a break with the modern project's search for order and distinctness or being able to separate right from wrong (Bauman 1991).

Our understanding is that in a world where complex and contradictory power structures shape our social and political lives, understanding the relationship between history, consciousness, and agency depends on the idea that these power structures are multiple, fluid, and intersecting. Thus, we need to focus more on process and form rather than on binary expressions. There is a need to focus more on the relationships between, for instance, risk analysis and power structures than the question of 'what is a risk' and 'what is not a risk'. In moving away from dualistic thinking, ambivalence captures a conceptualisation of consciousness, power, and authority that is frequently contradictory. Amongst other things, it means that we need theoretical tensions and inconsistencies in our analysis because these provide valuable insights into the dissonances of life as it is lived.

This dilemma has been the subject of frequent discussion amongst feminists, and the ambivalence of feminist theory and practice is clear, as the urgent desire for increased equality has, paradoxically, prompted new divisions. As feminist criticism unified the group *women* (as subordinate) and the group *men* (as superior), differences within the group of women and between men became less visible. In addition, these differences structure power and often prove greater than the differences between men and women. Black women, lesbians, women with disabilities, and others began to ask new and complex questions, making it increasingly clear that the creation of a 'community' depends on how power relationships interact intersectionally, resulting in new ideals that need to be properly considered (Hill Collins 1989). This is about how uniform signifiers and categorisations always fail and the awkward feeling of being assigned to a category, women for example, where you feel you do not belong. Or where you are supposed to belong, yet you do not quite belong. For that reason, it is important to remain critical of such set identities. This can be compared to what we referred to above as a strategic position of ambivalence (cf. Fahlgren et al. 2016)—that is, holding a position that does not attempt to resolve or deny ambivalence, as previously described. Instead, it involves raising awareness of the broader situation and maintaining this

ambivalent position—making use of it by confronting differences that help open up other types of knowledge and other ways of viewing the world or the self in pursuit of deeper understanding.

For this we can learn that to be a subject is to be dependent on the discourses, ideas, techniques, and devices that shape us as part of a world that is to some extent established by norms and normality. In this context, it seems important to note that this extends beyond how we are influenced by ideas and social constructs to the more complicated interaction amongst materialities, practices, techniques, languages, and so on. So, where does this line of reasoning lead? Could ambivalence be considered an epistemology, in which reflexivity and 'objectualism' (Latour 2003, for more information see Chap. 7) replace dualism in terms of actor–structure? Or does it maintain the binary worldview of the Enlightenment, through dialectics, presupposing that actor and structure, body and soul have to be thought of simultaneously, thus, we are unable to understand soul without the body, and ultimately, we cannot think equality without inequality? In other words, dialectics presuppose dualism, a world divided between equal and unequal, good and evil, actor and structure, even though Merton and Barber's pendulum swings between the individual's different social positions, generating ambivalence as it never stops in the middle (Merton and Barber 1976). This simultaneous existence of extremes informs the emergence of ambivalence. What is, then, the particular contribution of this all important notion of ambivalence? The answer is that it opens up room for a kind of eclecticism, to build a theory where the pieces do not, and should not, always fit together, since we need different angles and perspectives to fully embrace the complexity of cohesion, agency, discourse, and the spatial.

Outline of the Book

The theoretical framework of this book presents conceptual apparatuses for critical and feminist analyses of risk, power, and inequality by embracing ambivalence and it departs from an intersectional perspective. To identify such tools, we will uncover the social world of risk bit by bit through a discussion of external constraints on human beings that are

commonly described as 'social structures': collective habits formalised as legal rules, policy, norms, moral obligations, and so on, to ensure the cohesion and continued reproduction of a given socio-cultural system. Another major theme explored later in the book is the somewhat opposing concept of 'action' or 'agency', referring to the individual subject's intrinsic will and ability to act independently, and the possibility of change and resistance. In sociology, this agency–structure divide has been expressed in many ways, including individual–collective, person–society, micro–macro, desire–repression, and creativity–constraint. The distinction has been rejected by poststructuralists such as French philosophers Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida and the opposing terms have been reintegrated in structuration theory and institutional ethnography; later in this book we will include the alternative understandings of the social world these thinkers have contributed.

Social theorists have grappled with issues of structure and agency for generations (Connell 2004), and at first glance, the pieces of the jigsaw seem to fit together well within this familiar conceptual divide. However, when pieces from different puzzles are mixed and the intersectional approach to inequality and risk enters the picture, the results appear ambiguous. Needless to say, this means that we are also critical of some of the theories and perspectives discussed in this volume. For example, in Chap. 7 when we present theories on networks, assemblages, and (new) materialism—theories that privilege fluidity, tactility, ontology, affect, and information—we still hold on to the ways that intersectionality privileges naming, visuality, epistemology, representation, and meaning as our standpoint. Hence, we consider aspects of particular writers' argumentation useful for an intersectional risk theory, whilst at the same time we also find other claims and conceptualisations problematic and not in line with our intersectional perspective. Rather than attempting to force the pieces together or to conceal their lack of fit, this book invites the reader to consider that the pieces need not necessarily fit, because only in a broken mirror can we gain true perspective on our own time.

The book comprises nine chapters, including this first chapter, and an epilogue. Whilst intersectionality, risk, and inequality are present in all chapters, the frame of ambivalence is mainly discussed in this first and the last chapter. The chapter structure does not reflect strict boundaries

between different theories as much as ways of understanding the interplay between risk and inequality. The following six chapters outline theoretical and analytical points of departure and associated developments. In Chap. 2, risk and intersectionality are explored and intersectional risk theory is introduced. In Chap. 3, governance and normalisation of risk are discussed as constituting a purely structural process that takes the subject for granted. Chapter 4 examines how external constraints determine the subject but focuses on how the subject becomes possible through structure—for example, through interpellation and as a moral subject—and what it means for risk and inequality when one is 'at risk' or 'a risk'. In Chap. 5, the subject is foregrounded as an actor, although still constrained by structural processes. Here, the focus shifts towards how discourses of risk are negotiated, understood, and resisted in relation to the intersections of different power structures. Chapter 6 investigates the phenomenology of risk, turning to the subject behind the mask and asking whether a conjunction can be found amongst risk, power, and inequality beyond norms and hegemonic structures, or at least how this is played out in contemporary theorising. Chapter 7 brings the theoretical section to a close by addressing 'the material turn' in the social sciences, introducing some insights that we consider important for an intersectional analysis of risk. Next, Chap. 8 discusses how these different theoretical perspectives can inform methodological choices and empirical investigations. The book ends with Chap. 9, focusing on the framework of intersectional risk theory, and an epilogue that sketches some thoughts about a different future.

Presented below is a brief outline of each chapter in turn.

Chapter 2. Conceptual Frames: Risk and Intersectionality

This chapter introduces the central concepts of the book: risk and intersectionality. First, risk as a theoretical concept is introduced and defined, followed by a discussion of the relationship between risk, uncertainty, and power. Thereafter, the concept of intersectionality and its development are presented and our own standpoint is defined. We do not simply

appropriate a concept that has become very popular across various fields of research, but rather, we want acknowledge and use this perspective in the tradition of critical gender studies to make new understandings of risk possible. The chapter ends with a brief introduction of intersectional risk theory, and how new understandings and analyses of risk can be achieved through an intersectional perspective.

Chapter 3. Risk, Inequality, and (Post-) Structure: Risk as Governing

This chapter elaborates how intersectional risk theory relates to, departs from, and contributes to understandings of risk as a governing societal principle, not only as a tenet of the risk society thesis but more especially in the context of risk regimes and as a technology for risk governance. We explore theoretical accounts of how risk and, more specifically, risk governance and regulation, have become elements of power in the contemporary world, or at least in the Global North, (re)producing inequalities of health and wealth. In particular, the chapter examines theoretical understandings of risk and inequality inspired by the governmentality perspective, including the colonisation of risk and risk regimes and how conceptualisations of normalisation invite an intersectional analysis of social structures and risk, bridging the divide between the theorising of gender and risk.

Chapter 4. The Performative Aspects of Risk and the Constitution of Subjects

This chapter continues the exploration of risk in relation to structure by introducing normalisation, interpellation, and performativity vis-à-vis risk. Normalisation combined with intersectionality enables an analysis of normative notions of risk governance, where biopolitics, biopower, and ethopower are key concepts. A large part of the chapter presents and discusses Judith Butler's theoretical development of performativity and interpellation and considers how her insights can contribute to the understanding of 'at risk' and 'risky' subject positions. This discussion is

followed by a section that engages in the moral aspects of risk and self-governance through moral and performative discourses.

Chapter 5. Doing, Redoing, and Doing Away: Performing Risk

This chapter theoretically explores performance and performativity and understandings of the power of risk and how it can be challenged. To fully understand the power dimensions of risk and how these can be challenged, there is a need to address both practice and performativity. Agency is in the foreground, but the discussion includes how agency relates to ideology and other social structures and how reality relates to discourse. The ontological status of 'risk'—that is, whether it is 'real' or merely constructed—has been the subject of intense debate, and there is no consensus within the research community on this issue. The chapter includes a discussion of how we can gain knowledge about the relationship between the awareness of risk and the materialised consequences in the life of the individual. It shows the importance of the local and the particular in gaining knowledge of the relationship between reality and discourse. However, the chapter begins with an overview of risk theories that situate risk subjects in an individualised and reflexive context, and moves from there to a feminist discussion of the relationship between the performance of risk and the doing of gender. The chapter ends with a discussion on resistance and how the relationship between risk and inequality can be redone or undone.

Chapter 6. The Lived Experience of Risk: Multiple Standpoints and Agencies

Turning to the phenomenology of risk, we unpack the theoretical underpinnings of intersectional risk theory, including standpoint theory, lifeworlds, and embodiment. Here, we ask if it is possible to trace a conjunction amongst risk, power, and inequality in understandings of everyday practices of risk. Drawing particularly on feminist epistemologies based on the insights of standpoint theory together with Simone de