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Third World gap year projects: youth transitions and the mediation of risk

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Abstract. In recent years in the UK there has been a great expansion in the number of young people travelling to Third World countries between school and university in order to participate as volunteers on structured gap year projects. Travel to such places is commonly perceived as 'risky', and takes young people outside the protective cocoon of UK health and safety legislation. One of the functions played by the providers of gap year projects is to mediate risk. On the basis of analysis of promotional literature, interviews with organisers of gap year projects, and focus groups of returned volunteers, in this paper I argue that the various strategies of risk mediation undertaken by gap year providers serve to reconcile modernising tendencies in UK society toward risk control and structure with postmodern inclinations towards individualisation and uncertainty.

Introduction

Over the past decade, social scientists have begun to examine how young people's 'transitions to adulthood' have changed in 'late modernity' (eg Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Valentine, 2003). The emergent literature has engaged with Beck's (1992) propositions concerning individualisation and 'risk society'. This literature has, however, remained narrowly focused, and has not fully explored the tensions and paradoxes of a society drawn between (postmodern) tendencies to individualisation and (modern) drives to eliminate risk and uncertainty. This paper contributes to the, as yet relatively sparse, geographies of youth transitions, by analysing the role of Third World[(1)] gap year projects.

Gap year projects, in which British school leavers participate as volunteers in structured placements in Third World countries, have witnessed a dramatic expansion in recent years. They have seldom, however, been subjected to academic research. In this paper I argue that gap year projects serve to mediate between countervailing societal tendencies towards modernity and postmodernity, by mobilising the global spatiality of (physical) risk—as both social construct and 'reality' (see Beck, 2000). The paper begins by outlining notions of modernity, postmodernity and risk. It explores how scholars have used these concepts to examine changing transitions to adulthood; 'alternative' travel; and attitudes towards young people and risk.

[(1)] Although far from satisfactory, the term 'Third World' is used here in preference to others that are in common use. 'South' and 'Global South' are geographically inaccurate and suggest a symmetry that depoliticises differences between rich and poor worlds. To speak of countries as 'developing' or 'underdeveloped' identifies them only in relation to an implicitly agreed normative process of 'development'. Coupled with 'developed world', 'developing world' also implies economic convergence, when in reality the world is becoming more unequal. Furthermore, 'Third World' not only signifies particular territories and the people who inhabit them, but it also indicates an imaginary that has been imposed by the West on those regions. It is this imaginary that gap year providers draw on, more than one of 'development'. It must be recognised, nonetheless, that any term that imposes a common identity on diverse regions is inadequate, both in assigning a false homogeneity to Third World countries and in falsely implying homogeneity of experience among those countries' inhabitants.

After introducing gap years, the paper draws on empirical research to chart how risk is managed by gap year providers, and the consequences for young people's experiences of risk. The paper concludes that, through their mobilisation of spatially uneven maps of risk, gap year providers commodify a need in late modernity for reconciliation of (generationally divided) trends associated with modernity and postmodernity.

Modernity, postmodernity, and risk

Scholars have charted a change in Western societies since the late-20th century from a condition characterised as 'modernity', rooted in 18th-century notions of Enlightenment, to a new era, variously termed 'late' or 'high modernity' (Giddens, 1991); 'late capitalism' (Harvey, 1990); 'reflexive modernity' (Beck, 1994); or 'postmodernity' (Bauman, 1992). While the differing terminology reflects contestation as to the precise characteristics of the new condition, and the extent of rupture with the past, certain elements are widely acknowledged. Under 'modernity', control over space and social life was sought through the application of science and rationality. This universalising discourse held that, through regulation, social practices could be governed in the interests of constant progress. Postmodernity,[2] by contrast, eschews order and rationality. The emphasis is on fragmentation—of identity and consumption patterns. Unpredictability, individuality, and autonomy are celebrated (Lash and Urry, 1994).

Postmodernity is not the polar opposite of modernity but is understood to have emerged from contradictions inherent in modernity (Beck, 1994). To achieve security, modernity required curtailment of freedom, ultimately breeding insecurity. Postmodernity embraces freedom, yet freedom generates uncertainty, and ultimately diminishes individual control (Bauman, 1997). These contradictions have not been resolved, but characterise contemporary society.

A key process of postmodernity is individualisation. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that lives are increasingly individualised, each individual constructing his or her identity, rather than subscribing to collective (for example, class-based) identities. Biographies, it is said, become freely chosen rather than ascribed. Nonetheless, while social class may no longer determine lifestyle, inequality persists, and within this unequal context individuals seek ways (arguably class-based) to differentiate themselves.[3] "The more freedom of choice one has, the higher is one's rank in the postmodern social hierarchy" (Bauman, 1997, page 93).

A related concept, which reflects the uncertainties associated with increasing freedoms, is 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). "This concept designates a developmental phase of modern society in which the social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection in industrial society" (Beck, 1994, page 5). Defined as "the possibility of incurring misfortune or loss" (Collins, 1985, page 1259), risk refers to events that have not happened and (in late modernity) are ultimately indeterminate. Epistemologically, risk cannot therefore be studied in purely objective, rationalist terms, yet neither are risks mere social constructs (Beck, 2000; Pain, 2006). Misfortune happens, and fear has consequences. "[R]isks are at the same time 'real' *and* constituted by social perception and construction" (Beck, 2000, page 219, emphasis in original). It is thus important to consider tangible experiences and material impacts of misfortune and fear: experiences grounded in particular places and shaped by socioeconomic differences as well as by (geographically specific) public discourses (Pain, 2006).

[2] I employ the term 'postmodernity' to signify the 'idealised' condition, and 'late modernity' to refer to the contemporary era in which contradictory trends towards modernity and postmodernity are being played out.

[3] Beck's views on class are strongly contested (Harvey, 1990).

The following sections focus on youth transitions and 'alternative' travel, both of which are located at the disjuncture between modernity, which produces experts who minimise risk and generate trust for the mass of the population, and postmodernity, which proclaims and celebrates individuality and the end of certainty. In both contexts, institutions are involved in organising controlled and commodified opportunities for individualised biography construction.

Transitions to adulthood: reflexive individualisation?

Modernity cast youth as a series of parallel transitions centred on key events (leaving home, joining the labour market, forming new families), through which young people were expected to move en route from childhood to adulthood (Jones and Wallace, 1992). Both poststructuralist critique and the experience of late modernity have challenged the linearity of this model, and the fixity of childhood and adulthood as endpoints. Although, in general, youth geographies have received little attention (Hopkins, 2006; Valentine, 2003), geographers have been at the forefront of those arguing that studies of youth transitions need to recognise that childhood and adulthood are socially constructed (Valentine and Skelton, 2003), mean different things for differently located young people (Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004), and implicate particular spatialities (Hopkins, 2006). Neither childhood nor adulthood is simply a matter of age or physical maturity; both are performative identities (Valentine, 2003). Hence, childhood is not "a fixed or static category that we grow out of" but rather "a process that shapes us throughout the life course" (page 39).

In late modernity, youth transitions are increasingly complex, fractured, multiple, and unpredictable (Jones and Wallace, 1992; McDowell, 2002; Molgat, 2002; Pais, 2000; Valentine, 2003; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). While there may be 'critical moments' in young people's transitions (Thomson et al, 2002), transitions are not a one-off or one-way process (Valentine, 2003). Their sequencing and timing vary as some aspects speed up and others grow more protracted (Valentine and Skelton, 2003). Thus, "[y]oung people can become adult according to one criterion but not another" (Jones, 2002, page 2).

Scholars have drawn on the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) to argue that youth in late modernity is becoming more individualised, with life courses no longer rigidly predetermined by social and economic structures or normative models of transition (Valentine, 2003). Giddens (1991) describes life as a 'biographical project' in which individuals construct their own biographies reflexively in relation to social change. Young people thus devote time to self-consciously shaping their identities (Hall et al, 1999).

The 'individualisation thesis', and particularly the view that individuals' choices are more important than their class position in shaping their biographies (Valentine, 2003), is highly contested. Studies have found that structural factors, including class, remain significant in shaping transitions (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) and that, at least for poorly skilled and low school achievers, Beck's thesis exaggerates the fluidity of contemporary societies (McDowell, 2002). Others have found that, while class remains important, transitions are also highly diverse among working-class youth (MacDonald and Marsh, 2004). While class ties and identities may be weakening (Valentine and Skelton, 2003, page 851), the options available to young people are limited and the 'discourse of choice' is more common among privileged youth (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). Class and family background represent constraints (McDowell, 2002). Family resources (economic, social, cultural, and affective) may facilitate transitions (Valentine and Skelton, 2003): an intergenerational transfer of 'assets' that helps maintain class boundaries (Ahier and Moore, 1999). Thus, Evans and Heinz (1994), acknowledging

that young people are experiencing individualisation, distinguish between active and passive individualisation. Only young people who are able to mobilise strong social networks can achieve autonomy through active individualisation.

While late modernity may favour privileged youth, 'active individualisation' is not achieved without effort. Youth transitions are problematic for all social classes in the West: "the restructuring of work opportunities places intense pressure on middle-class parents as they seek to prepare their children for a new range of flexible jobs" (Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004, page 134).

One of the paradoxes of individualisation is the pressure to make the 'right' choices. Late modernity's irreconcilable tension between freedom and security produces two trends that seemingly contradict individualisation. First, transitions to adulthood are generally more protracted than in the past (Jones and Wallace, 1992; Molgat, 2002; Pais, 2000; Valentine, 2003). Society treats young people as 'less than adult' well beyond the age of majority, denying them full autonomy, and many (particularly middle-class) young people elect to defer adult roles (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Pais, 2000). Second, autonomy appears to be undermined by increased structuring of young people's lives—from the dictates of national school curricula to the growing participation of young people in organised clubs and structured activities outside school (see, for example, Smith and Barker, 2000). Rather than autonomous choice, there is pressure to engage in particular forms of identity work to construct particular kinds of identity. Time is supposed to be used in 'constructive' activities, the organisation of which is increasingly commodified. Constructing a successful middle-class identity takes time, effort, and money.

Youth transitions research, however, has remained confined to narrow areas of young people's lives. The focus on transitions to independent living and, especially, to work has neglected important sociocultural aspects of youth (Cohen and Ainley, 2000; McDowell, 2002; Valentine, 2003). Risk is considered largely in relation to the hazards young people face in choosing successful pathways to adulthood, and the individualisation of blame for failure (Ansell, 2004; Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004; Valentine, 2003). Although work on children and risk is prolific, few studies have examined how young people confront and make use of physical risks in their transitions to adulthood. Despite the work of geographers cited above, the role of place also remains relatively neglected in studies of youth transitions.

Travel and adventure in biography construction

In late modernity, not only are young people's lives less governed by traditional social relations than in the past but also, according to the individualisation thesis, social relations have become disembedded from local contexts, and restructured across space, such that individuals construct identities and choose lifestyles that are not necessarily tied to their places of origin (Giddens, 1991). Geographers have contributed to our understanding of how place is mobilised in postmodern identity construction through tourism (Urry, 1995). Desforges (2000) argues that through tourism people develop a self-consciousness about their place in the world: they envisage the sort of person they want to become and invest in performing that identity. Cultural tourism, the search for new cultural experiences, demands greater effort than the mass tourism that characterises modernity, but perseverance in the face of discomforts is rewarded by enhancement of self-image (Stebbins, 1997). Spatial difference is important, and Third World places are sought out as venues for 'alternative' tourism, which allow the 'new' middle classes in the West to distinguish themselves from those who engage in mass tourism (Mowforth and Munt, 2003), identifying themselves as 'cosmopolitan', with "an ability to experience, to discriminate and to risk different natures and societies"

(Lash and Urry, 1994, page 256). Such environments are imagined and encountered by young people as places where they can perform individual achievement, strength of character, adaptability, and worldliness (Desforges, 2000), characteristics which gain new meaning at home. 'Alternative' tourism provides cultural capital for new middle-class identities and, in some cases, an informal qualification, valuable for employment in both tourism and development sectors (Munt, 1994).

To construct biographies that demonstrate achievement and strength of character, young people seek places that provide opportunities for risk-taking. "When taking risks, life is carved out rather than merely lived in the imprints of others" (Elsrud, 2001, page 603). As Mathlein suggests: "Malaria, or the scars from a knifing tragedy in Bogota, are incidents which, mentioned in passing, make a strong impression and immediately promote the victim from tourist to traveller" (cited in Elsrud, 2001, page 601). Here, risk-taking is both a material, physical fact and "a device used to construct a story", which needs to be understood in relation to "a dominant 'grand narrative of travel' in which independent journeying to places described as 'Third World', 'primitive', 'poor', or 'underdeveloped' is seen as both risky and rewarding" (Elsrud, 2001, page 598). There is a noteworthy continuity between the use of Third World environments in colonial times as resources for privileged Western youth to undertake adventure, and their use as a 'pleasure periphery' today (Desforges, 2000). Scheyvens (2002, page 148) highlights the problematic power relations involved using a quotation from *Are You Experienced?*, Sutcliffe's (1999) novel about backpacker culture: "University of Life. Year one: Advanced Adventure Playgrounds. Part One Exam: go to the Third World and survive. No revision, interest or sensitivity required."

As with the general individualisation of youth transitions, risk-taking travel does not take place free from the constraining reigns of structured modernity. Although it is generally noninstitutionalised travellers who are viewed as 'risk-takers' (Elsrud, 2001), fundamental to the contemporary possibility of travel has been the development, beginning in the 19th century with Thomas Cook, of organised structures of travel and tourism (Lash and Urry, 1994, page 257). "Cook's was responsible for a number of innovations which transformed travel from something that was individually arranged and full of risks and uncertainty into one of the most organized and rationalized of human activities based on considerable professional expertise" (page 263).

Organised tourism not only gave people confidence to travel, but also underlay "the development of a number of romanticized 'place-myths' to attract potential travellers" (Lash and Urry, 1994, page 260). Today, there is a tension in these place myths. Many tourists are concerned to reduce the risks associated with international tourism (identified as terrorism; war and political instability; health concerns; and crime), and allaying fears remains a challenge for the industry (Lepp and Gibson, 2003). This is exacerbated by place images in which entire continents become generalised as risky (Carter, 1998). By contrast, alternative tourism outlets survive on place myths of adventure. 'Overland' travel company, Dragoman, for instance, advertises to "those who want the thrill of 'real travel'... .We will be crossing areas of the world that do not adhere to western safety standards and may have inherent political and economic instability" (cited in Mowforth and Munt, 2003, page 68). Such companies commodify opportunities for biography construction, mediating between postmodern desires for individuality and uncertainty, and modernity's concern for structure and risk minimisation. In some respects, gap year providers are reflective of these organisations, but their roles are complicated by the fact that they cater to a youth market.

Risk anxiety and the young

The view of encountering risk as a desirable component of a successful biography is at odds with attitudes towards risk prevalent in recent decades. Risk anxiety is characteristic of late modern 'risk society' (Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1991). Risk is predominantly viewed in negative terms. Any postmodern embrace of unpredictability is resisted by a widespread ('modern') expectation that risks should be controlled. At the same time, childhood [idealised as innocent, free, and unfettered (Pain, 2006)] has become crucially important to the ways in which Western society imagines itself. Children, constructed as vulnerable and incompetent, are considered particularly in need of protection from risk (France, 2000; James et al, 1998; Jenks, 2005).

Discourses of children at risk are always spatialised (Pain, 2004). Risk to children is popularly conceived as increasing with physical distance from home (Harden, 2000; Pain, 2006). These discourses are manifested in precautions that restrict young people's independent spatial range and increase their regulation and surveillance by adults (Aitken, 2001; James et al, 1998; Katz, 1993; O'Brien et al, 2000; Valentine, 1997; 2000). Children, too, have spatialised notions of risk, but for them risk is sometimes seen more positively, as excitement (Green et al, 2000; Pain, 2004). Children tend to have a strong sense of invulnerability, partly gained through well-developed local knowledge (Valentine, 1997).

Risk for children is not merely a discourse with material effects. Children in Western societies are subject to 'actual' risks, although those risks that capture the public imagination are generally statistically rare events such as abduction and murder (Pain, 2004). As with risk discourses, material risk is spatially and also socially uneven. Children from poorer backgrounds in Western societies have much higher rates of death and injury than those from more affluent homes (Pain, 2006), yet it is privileged children who are most shielded from harm (Aitken, 2001).

Whereas, in the past, adolescence and early adulthood were generally regarded as stages in life when people had few social responsibilities, and were therefore permitted, even encouraged, to take more risks (Plant and Plant, 1992), they have gradually become redefined as periods in which people are particularly 'at risk', both from external causes and from personally 'inflicted' behaviours such as drinking, drug-taking, and (unsafe) sex (France, 2000; Hendry et al, 1993; Plant and Plant, 1992; Schoon and Bynner, 2003). Although spatial restrictions still diminish as young people grow older (James et al, 1998), 'adulthood' is increasingly deferred. Even in their late teens, many middle-class youth are accompanied by adults on visits to distant places—for example, attending university open days—and experience relatively little spatial autonomy prior to leaving school.

Third World gap year projects are of interest here because, by placing young people in distant environments, which lie beyond the protective cocoon of UK health and safety legislation, they appear to confound trends in society in relation to risk avoidance. The fact that gap year placements are located in places perceived as 'risky' is not accidental, but rather the risk is an element which young people are encouraged to draw on in identity construction. In this paper, I argue that a key function served by gap year providers is the mediation of (the perception of) risk, making it acceptable both to young consumers and to their parents and society at large.

Third World gap year projects

Growth of the gap year

Whereas in 1986 only 5.5% of UK university applicants took a 'year out' (Rogers, 1986), today about 50 000 of the 370 000 individuals (14%) entering UK universities each year have taken a gap year (The Gapyear Company, 2004; UCAS, 2003). While many young people spend the year working in the UK or travelling independently, around 6% participate in structured gap year placements (The Gapyear Company, 2004). About 350 000 overseas volunteering placements are offered annually to 16–25-year-olds in 200 countries, a large proportion of which are taken up by UK-based[4] participants (Jones, 2004). Most projects in the Third World last 3–12 months, with 45% of overseas placements in social work; 21% involving work with children (often in schools); 17% involving conservation/environmental work; and 12% involving practical projects (Jones, 2004).

The Third World gap year project is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although Voluntary Service Overseas began sending volunteers overseas in 1958, it was not until 1972 that the first organisation dedicated to providing overseas gap years for young people, Gap Activity Projects (GAP), was founded. Since then, the number of organisations, both charitable and commercial, has expanded greatly. Thirty-eight organisations belong to the Year Out Group, an association formed by gap year providers, with support from UCAS and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), to "promote the concept and benefits of well-structured year out programmes, to promote models of good practice and to help young people and their advisers in selecting suitable and worthwhile projects" (Year Out Group, 2006). Fifty-eight organisations advertise on Gapyear.com, a dedicated website set up by The Gapyear Company (2006), and over 1300 on the WorldWide Volunteering database (WWV, 2006). The government is actively encouraging young people to spend a year volunteering, with the appointment of a minister responsible for gap years (*The Guardian* 2002), a discussion paper recommending financial support for such students (HM Treasury/Home Office, 2002), a House of Lords debate (Simpson, 2005), an Informal Consultation Group on Gap Years within the DfES, and a DfES report (Jones, 2004). Nonetheless, the latter report comments that "there has not been any substantial academic or policy research" on gap years (page 7).

Gap year projects as structured biography construction

Gap year projects are not simply travel or tourism. Engaging young people in 'structured' and 'constructive' activities is fundamental to their rationale. While gap year organisations differ greatly (Jones, 2004), gap year projects do 'structure' young people's transitions to adulthood. Taking time out has become more institutionalised and corporate (Duncan, 2004; Simpson, 2005). As Duncan (2004, page 11) suggests, "The growth of many of the volunteer gap year companies has provided structure, security and back up to what was previously seen as an unstructured exploration of other places, peoples and cultures."

Great virtue is made by organisations of the fact that young people are doing something 'constructive'. Griffin (2004, page 24) points out that "educational institutions, government, the media and academia all seem to view volunteer tourism as good

[4] Third World gap year projects are particularly popular among young people from the UK. The Australian and New Zealand governments are encouraging young people to consider taking gap years, but most provision is for placements in Europe and North America. Overseas gap years are less common in other Western countries. There is no scope here to explore this spatiality, but it may reflect both colonial history and the (perceived) absence of 'risky' environments within the UK.

and right without substantial evidence." Volunteering offers added value to travel in biography construction. Personal and life skills associated with gap years including stress tolerance and coping with uncertainty are valued by employers yet are apparently in short supply (Jones, 2004). Gap years can thus be viewed as commodified CV building (Mowforth and Munt, 2003).

Although the declared purpose of gap year projects is voluntary work, attention has focused on individual career development rather than altruism (Simpson, 2005), with a "questionable ... state of balance between providing a useful service to the community and the volunteers' own personal development" (Roberts, 2004, page 29). The actual value of the activities undertaken is seldom scrutinised,[5] but the element of volunteering is crucial, not only for biography construction but because it offers a rationale for sending young people to 'challenging' Third World societies.[6]

Research methods

If risk is both a social construct and material reality, this has implications for the research process. The findings presented in this paper are based on three types of data. First, for a preliminary indication of how gap year providers represent and address risk, I analysed text and images presented on the websites of two umbrella organisations (the Year Out Group and The Gapyear Company), and of those Year Out Group members that offer Third World placements. Additional promotional materials were examined from two case study organisations (table 1). These were selected because they are both relatively large, high-profile organisations, but have distinctive approaches and aims. While the contrasts between the organisations are clear, however, they do not represent poles of a spectrum. There are many other types of organisation arranging different kinds of projects.

The second source of data was a series of individual interviews, and an informal focus-group discussion, with representatives of the two organisations. These explored experiences and procedures; they were taped and transcribed. Analysis focused on how risks were conceptualised, articulated, and managed, with transcripts cross-coded in relation to themes of youth transitions and spatiality. Since the rationale of gap year

Table 1. Case-study organisations.

Gap Activity Projects	Student Partnership Worldwide
Educational charity	International development charity
Little preparation	Considerable preparation
Structured package—clearly defined work	Belief in agency of youth—plan own projects
Low support in field—local 'agents'	More support in field—staffed offices
Over 1000 placements per year	Over 800 placements per year
Aims	*Aims*
Young people to discover things about the world and about themselves—to make a difference to themselves.	Young people to work together to achieve something—to (discover they can) make a difference in the world.
To instil in young people the concept of volunteering.	Emphasis on youth agency.
To produce ambassadors for the UK.	To produce ambassadors for youth.

[5] There are clear continuities with colonial encounters. Volunteers can have problematic impacts on their host communities and gap years may reinforce a worldview of Third World dependency.

[6] The intention is not to suggest that the only motivation for gap year projects is providing young people with an experience of risk in 'exotic' locations, but that this is one of a number of purposes, most of which are focused on the individual young person rather having broader social objectives.

providers is in part the representation of risk, the transcripts were interrogated both for what they revealed about how providers chose to represent risk and for how they confront the 'reality' of risks.

The third set of data was generated through a questionnaire and two small focus-group discussions conducted with former gap year participants. A questionnaire e-mailed to all Brunel University undergraduates identified 200 respondents who had taken gap years between school and university. Their responses were collated and analysed, and are used as an occasional source of evidence in this paper. However, the questionnaire's main function was to recruit participants for qualitative research. Twenty respondents had undertaken structured projects in the Third World, and these were invited to participate in focus groups, held at two of the university's campuses: nine of the young people accepted the invitation. All were undergraduates who had taken a single year out between finishing school and beginning their university studies; all but two were women and all were white.[7] Their degree subjects ranged from physiotherapy, film and TV, sport sciences, and biology to management. The participants had spent time in a range of Third World countries, and with organisations varying from locally based NGOs and small Christian missionary organisations to commercial gap year providers including GAP, Project Trust, and World Challenge. Most had engaged in teaching, but others had worked with street children or with church or women's groups. The focus groups, which were taped and transcribed, centred on the students' perceptions of risk before and during their gap years and the roles the gap year providers had played. As with the providers, the words of the participants should not go unquestioned. The young people's accounts are retrospective and reflexive, and package risk in deliberate ways for the focus-group audience. Gap year participation is a form of identity work aimed at, among other things, generating narratives that constitute cultural capital. Experience and negotiation of risk may be important aspects of the stories they seek to tell; young people make "active and creative use of risks as constructed ingredients in individual self-presentations" (Elsrud, 2001, page 602). Thus, while the main categories for analysis were themes developed from the focus group schedules, the transcripts were also interrogated for participants' self-presentations in relation to wider discourses of youth and adventure, as well as being examined for what they revealed about the embodied experience of risk. As with the interviews, the quotations drawn from the focus groups illustrate broader trends that emerged in the data analysis.

Representations of risk, both in publicity material and in the narratives of gap year providers and participants, are readily available to researchers. Gaining access to the perspectives of those actually experiencing or making decisions about risk is much more difficult. It is not possible to directly access other people's experiences, or even their (ever-changing) views on those experiences, whether through ethnographic or

[7] Nationally, gap year participants are predominantly white and women outnumber men (Jones, 2004). This is perhaps surprising given the masculine metanarrative of adventure that gap years play to, although today "women and men alike appear to 'practice risks' in their travels" (Elsrud, 2001, page 602). Most participants are from relatively affluent backgrounds in southeast England, although participants are becoming more diverse (Jones, 2004). At an aggregate level, Brunel students do not differ significantly in age, gender, socioeconomic background, or dis/ability from undergraduates nationally (HESA, 2005), although ethnic minority representation is considerably higher than at most universities. While such a small sample of young people cannot be expected to be statistically representative, this method brought together young people with diverse gap year experiences, and there is no reason to suppose that the focus group members were significantly distinct from former gap year participants more generally. Those students who had participated in organised Third World gap years were distinct from the broader student body at Brunel in their whiteness, but it is notable that a number of South Asian students also undertake gap years in which they spend time in Asian and African countries organised through family connections.

interview-type methods, and different research contexts encourage respondents to present (consciously or unconsciously) their stories and views in particular ways. The multimethod approach adopted here combined methods with differing merits and disadvantages, shedding light on a diverse, but inevitably limited, range of viewpoints.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. The first draws on information from all three data sources to examine how gap year providers manage risk, the contrasting perspectives they seek to reconcile, and the strategies they adopt. This is followed by an exploration of young people's experiences of risk in their placements. The concluding section examines how spatially uneven risk is mobilised in mediating societal tendencies towards postmodern individualisation and modernist control.

Gap year providers and risk management

Through this paper I argue that gap year providers commodify a product that enables young people to navigate conflicting societal pressures towards modernity and postmodernity. This is a paradoxical product: on the one hand, gap year providers must market challenge and adventure. Challenge is widely seen as positive: to meet a challenge is considered a worthwhile achievement; it gives a sense of success and is empowering. On the other hand, part of the appeal of organised gap year projects to consumers is the security they appear to provide. The GAP website at one time advertised "Challenge with Security" (GAP, 2000a).

The paradox is partly because providers have to sell their product simultaneously to two very different sets of customers. Although it is young people who sign up and participate, in an estimated 21% of cases parents are the main source of finance, and 17% of gap year participants report that their parents try to persuade them not to go (The Gapyear Company, 2000). Even where young people earn the money themselves to pay for their placement, in an era of protracted youth transitions they often remain dependent upon their parents for subsequent support while at university. Parental approval of the project is thus often very important.

Reconciling constructions of gap year risk

Gap year providers consequently need to reconcile three sets of spatialised risk perceptions: those of potential volunteers, their parents, and the organisation itself.[8] Gap year providers first need to promote gap year projects among young people looking for adventure. Analysis of the questionnaire responses, as well as focus groups, revealed some young people chose to take an overseas gap year for excitement and challenge. One of the commonest reasons cited for gap year participation is 'to meet a challenge' (Jones, 2004). Third World environments are perceived to pose particular challenges to those brought up in the UK. Although not the only motivation, the decision to spend a gap year in a Third World country may be a positive decision to embrace risk. Associated with Third World placements in young people's minds are challenges such as harsh living conditions, as Anna, a focus group participant, outlines:

> "And yeah, I probably did want to do the Third World thing, 'cos I don't—once, there comes a point, you know, I want to get the, sort of, I wanted to get the hard travelling and hard sort of living stuff sort of done."

[8] A fourth set of perceptions will not be discussed here: those of the host community. Both volunteers and providers explained that hosts were concerned about safety, but saw different sets of risks. It is not uncommon, for instance, for hosts to want to lock young people into their accommodation for protection, with little consideration of fire hazards.

To attract young people, therefore, gap year providers must market project locations as challenging and exotic. GAP finds it difficult to promote placements in Eastern Europe among young British people:

"We just can't persuade British people to go to Poland, because it's not seen as glamorous enough and—this is where I became interested in risk—perhaps not risky enough—too safe" (project director, GAP).

Poland is not sufficiently 'exotic' or 'Third World' for British volunteers, even if, in reality, the placements are more difficult and risky than many in more 'exotic' locations. Among Australians and New Zealanders, by contrast, distant Poland has greater allure:

"they see Europe as all bordering Yugoslavia or Northern Ireland" (project director, GAP).

Perceived risk is highly spatialised and partly a function of geographical distance.

Although seeking excitement and challenge, most of the focus group participants claimed they had given little advance thought to any physical risks they might confront.

"I suppose it's one of the things you don't think about when—before you go. You kind of think 'oh, I'll be obvious because I'm white', but that's, that's as far as it goes" (Anna).

While comments such as this may reflect an intention to convey a particular impression, the participants were not reluctant to talk about fears they experienced once on placement. This apparent initial imagined invulnerability to physical dangers corresponds to a 'personal fable' that is said to characterise early adulthood (Plant and Plant, 1992, after Elkand, 1967). Although they anticipated challenge, most reported having been more concerned about the risk of wasting time and money on a venture they might not enjoy than about physical dangers:

"Maybe one of my fears was not getting on with the people I was gonna be living with. But I didn't worry about it too much.' (Alan).

Parents' perceptions, as reported both by their offspring and by the organisations, are different, and their interest as customers of gap year organisations may conflict with those of their children. Among parents the priority is to avoid places they perceive as risky. For parents, distance and exoticism are not attractive challenges but markers of danger to be avoided. The focus-group participants, while claiming to be unconcerned about risks themselves, represented their parents as fearful for their safety. Parental fears, they reported, were related to the geographical contexts of the placements, with Third World countries perceived as inherently risky.[9]

"I told my parents that I was going to China, and they were like 'Oh, Caroline, I don't think you can, you can go to China. What a dangerous country! How awful!' 'Cos no one still knows very much about China. It's relatively unknown" (Caroline).

"My parents were really keen, until I told them I was doing South Africa" (James).

Gap year providers similarly reported that among parents distance and unfamiliarity breed expectations of danger. While Eastern Europe provokes few concerns among Western European parents, those living in more distant places see it as risky:

"an Australian parent on the phone to me was very worried about her son going to 'Yugoslovakia'... Quote!" (project director, GAP).

Alongside young people's and their parents' perceptions are those of the organisations themselves. Gap year providers admit that volunteers are exposed to 'real' risks, however slight these may be.

[9] Young people may exaggerate their parents' expressed fears to support their own narratives of independence and daring, but parental fear is clearly a target for gap year marketing, as the next section indicates.

"a volunteer who we place in Nepal is exposing him or herself to various risks that they wouldn't have if they were staying in Reading" (project director, GAP).

Providers' perceptions of the risks facing volunteers differ from those of young people and their parents. They are inspired not by a fear of the unknown, but by a rationalist assessment of empirical evidence and experience. Despite the globally uneven geography of risk, in statistical terms levels of risk are not high: it has been estimated that approximately three young people die each year in gap-year-related accidents (McDougall, 2000). The director of GAP reported a total of four deaths among approximately 20 000 volunteers over the past ten years. This is not a greatly increased risk over that which would otherwise prevail among young people.[10]

This rationalist, statistical approach dominates providers' articulated assessments of risk.

"If you went to a statistician, they would say that by stepping out onto the road here, you are bringing the stats down to a million to one against dying, probably, and by going out to Africa you may be bringing it down to 120 000 to one against dying" [programme director, Student Partnership Worldwide (SPW)].

Both organisations were agreed that, on this basis, road accidents posed the most significant threat:[11]

"You came out here thinking mugging and malaria were gonna kill you, but ... more ex-pats are killed by vehicles than they are by all other things put together when they go and visit Africa—sub-Saharan Africa" (programme director, SPW).

"In India the biggest risk is travelling on an Indian bus" (director, GAP).

Gap year providers' perceptions of risk do not, however, reflect a simple objective calculation of relative risks. Rather, their concerns are skewed towards dangers that might expose them to risks. They are aware that 'misfortunes' occurring to volunteers carry risks of litigation and damage to reputation.

"We have to think through what we are liable for, what we should be doing for these people, when we are responsible and not responsible" (programme director, SPW).

"You don't have to upset a parent much before they'll tell all their mates not to go near you" (project director, GAP).

Perceptions of risk, then, are divided along at least two axes. One axis follows a generational divide between (postmodern) children, who embrace risk as a resource for individualisation, and their (modern) parents, concerned to control risk. The other axis broadly distinguishes consumers (both children and parents), whose perceptions are drawn from popular discourse, and providers, who draw on rationalist discourse. Both sets of perceptions are highly spatialised, but, whereas the popular version maps risk onto distance and exoticism, the rationalist view relies on statistical evidence from international databases.

[10] In 2004 death rates in the UK were 0.4 per 1000 among males aged 15 – 19 years and 0.2 among females, rising to 0.7 and 0.3, respectively, among 20 – 24-year-olds. Among young men aged 15 – 24 years, about half the deaths were due to 'external causes' such as accidents (Office for National Statistics, 2006). Four deaths among 20 000 volunteers, each spending an average of six months overseas, would amount to an annual death rate of approximately 0.4 per 1000. A recent survey suggested similarly relatively low levels of illness and injury associated with organised expeditions (Anderson and Johnson, 2000).

[11] In Third World countries there are 20 – 70 fatalities per 10 000 vehicles annually, compared with 2 per 10 000 in Western countries (WHO, 2001). Whereas, in high-income areas of Europe, road accidents account annually for the deaths of 11 people per 100 000, in Africa, despite much lower levels of vehicle ownership, the road-accident-related death rate is 28.3 per 100 000 (WHO, 2004).

Strategies for managing risk

Managing risk in gap year projects is not, therefore, a simple question of risk minimisation. It involves producing a product that reconciles divergent sets of perceptions, navigating between the modernist and postmodernist tendencies they encapsulate. Gap year providers employ a variety of (spatialised) strategies of risk minimisation and risk representation that encourage young people to perform individualised biographies while simultaneously asserting control in their transitions to adulthood.

Marketing risk as adventure

A GAP promotional video aimed at school students (and unlikely to be seen by parents) uses a video clip of volunteers having to deal with rats in their accommodation. In another sequence, volunteers show how they heat their water in a bucket using an open immersion heater loosely wired into a plug socket.

Volunteer 1: "Okay Mum... Right! This is really dangerous, what we had to do here! Right, you get the two wires like this, and then you switch it on so that you know whether it's sparking. If it sparks blue, then it's working."

Volunteer 2: "Sometimes they [sparks] come out here!"

Volunteer 1: "You stick it [the heater] in there, and then heat your water up in the bucket."

Volunteer 2: "Don't put your hand in, otherwise you electrocute yourself!"

Volunteer 1: "Yeah. If you put your hand in, then you get uhuhuh all up your arm!" (GAP, 1997).

This would very clearly contravene UK health and safety legislation, yet is openly portrayed to attract young customers who are presumed to wish to collect (risky) experiences unavailable in the West, in order to construct distinctive biographies. In contrast to widespread portrayals of individuals confronting wild environments, the clip, addressed to 'Mum', emphasises the distance of this domestic scene from the province of parental authority, and points to scope for performing autonomous adult roles.

Marketing relative safety

While promoting risk, providers also represent gap years as safer than alternatives. First, they are described as safer than travelling without the support of an organisation.

> "You must distinguish carefully between young people who go abroad and do a constructive work in a safe environment with people who go around backpacking... I personally think [those most at] risk are the backpackers who go on their own" (director, GAP).

Wandering freely is represented as dangerous; a structured experience is represented as safe and morally superior. Biography construction is presented as less a matter of free choice than of making the right choice about how to encounter Third World spaces.

Secondly, gap years are described as safer than other activities that young people participate in.

> "But the real anxiety in the parent's eyes is that of risk. Surely it had to be unwise to go, at 18, to the other side of the world... The evidence is that it is no more hazardous than other ways of spending your time at 18, such as playing rugby football, going clubbing or holidaying with friends in Majorca" (John Haden, a headteacher, cited on the website of GAP, 2000a)

Apparently in order to appeal to parents, parents of existing volunteers and figures of authority are cited to provide reassuring testimony.

Thirdly, gap year promoters present other places as more risky than the locations they use for placements. Certain countries [those which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advises against visiting] are simply labelled 'dangerous'. An article in *Gapyear Magazine*, entitled "World's most dangerous places", assigned 'rifle ratings' to ten countries (Gapyear Co., 2000). By implication, other countries are 'safe', and providers can claim that they do not send volunteers anywhere risky.

> "I don't think—within the bounds of practicalities—we don't put any volunteers in *actual* risk ... we don't place volunteers in places where there is actually a definite risk, I mean, you know—Kosovo or whatever, being the sort of, the most extreme example" (director, GAP).

By invoking the authority of the UK government through links to the FCO website, gap year providers demonstrate that the locations they use are not risky. This, however, reduces risk to a single dimension, related to the political stability of the country concerned. The FCO is primarily concerned about, for example, potential hijacking situations (unlikely even in the 'riskiest' places). It is unlikely to 'blacklist' a country where road deaths are particularly common, even though car crashes are far more likely to affect young people than political incidents. This is, therefore, a spatial representational strategy as much as an effort to reduce 'real' risk, which restricts young people's access to the globally uneven risk map.

Involving parents

Gap year providers' publicity material includes elements deliberately aimed at parents, including dedicated parents' webpages (GAP, 2005). Gapyear.com explicitly advises young people to involve their parents at the planning stage. Print and web-based literature can be used by young people to involve their parents in their projects, and to offer reassurance.

> "I got all the brochures and stuff sent through and I think that also helped my parents a lot because, um, I could actually show them where I was going" (Anna).

By providing information about places, the projects could be located in 'real' space, and fears associated with abstract notions of the 'Third World', 'China', or 'South Africa' might be moderated.

Once a young person has decided to undertake a gap year placement, parents relinquish a great deal of control. Once a young person is thousands of miles away and living in a situation that parents can perhaps barely imagine, a parent has little more influence than the young person is willing to afford them. In order to make this situation more palatable for parents—to allow them to continue to feel involved in their child's life, gap year providers find ways to give parents a sense of being involved, mediating their own experiences of risk, without deterring the young person. GAP, for instance, always invites parents to briefing sessions for volunteers (in exceptional circumstances it permits parents to attend briefings in place of the volunteers themselves). Parents are able to contact the organisations by telephone when they feel they need to. Other ways of involving parents are constantly sought:

> "they're making about as strong a statement of their independence as you can possibly make in going off to the other side of the world. And that's quite hard for some parents to cope with. Um. And one thing that we've toyed with the idea of for a long time now is to have some sort of parents' pack of—of advice" (project director, GAP).

While having little impact on 'actual' risk, the representational strategy of providing knowledge (channels) to parents mitigates volunteers' temporally abrupt and spatially extended transition to 'independent' living, promoting the continued role of parents in supporting 'active individualisation'.

Treating volunteers as 'not quite adult'

While young people over the age of 18 are legally independent, they are seldom economically independent of their parents. Nor do they necessarily consider themselves fully adult. In their questionnaire responses, many young people explained that they took a gap year because they felt insufficiently mature for university. Gap year providers are able, therefore, to treat volunteers as in some respects less than fully adult (although few accept volunteers under 18 years). GAP, for instance, labels those based in the UK who help assign volunteers to placements 'adult volunteers'. SPW insists on volunteers signing to allow SPW to contact parents directly if it is concerned about the young volunteer.

> "are we properly looking after all these gap year students? They are adults—they are 18 years old. So you've got a choice—you either get them to sign something off that says 'I accept the fact that I'm doing this at my own risk', or you've gotta care for them, and you've gotta forget that they're 18 years old and just say they're within our institution and we are liable... we now make them sign a thing that says we have a right to override you as an adult, um, and if we want to tell parents that you're in hospital on a drip, that is up to us to decide...they have to sign to say we accept the fact that if you [SPW] want to tell them *anything* about our lives out here, while we're on this, you can" (programme director, SPW).

In this instance, to reign in some of the autonomy afforded by spatial distance, the gap year provider insists on a reversal in one aspect of the transition to independent adulthood. Young people accept a form of interference, exercised at arm's length, that (one might expect) they would be unlikely to countenance at home.

Advising volunteers

Once volunteers have committed themselves and arrived in the host country, they are given safety advice. The tactic now is to lower their expectation of adventure, but at the same time to scare them as regards the potential risks.

> "we probably overemphasise things at the beginning, and are in danger of making people paranoid" (project director, GAP).

In Thailand, for example, the British Consul is invited to 'read the riot act' to new GAP volunteers—to give a vivid picture of what happens to anyone involved with illegal drugs in the country, and the likelihood of surviving a ride on a moped. SPW instructs volunteers in countries such as Tanzania not to use public transport. Transport is provided at the beginning and end of the placement. Although the organisations are aware that volunteers almost certainly will choose to travel away from the placement from time to time, giving such advice covers the organisation legally, besides perhaps persuading the volunteers to recognise the risks involved in such a venture. Thus, the purpose of advice is both to change young people's perception of risk so as to alter their behaviour thereby reducing the 'real' risk to which they are exposed, and to reduce the risk of bad publicity or litigation which the organisation might face in the event of an incident. Armed with place-specific knowledge, young people are expected to control their own exposure to risk.

Risk assessments and contingency plans

Regardless of how risks are presented to young people and their parents, precautions are taken to manage the actual risks to which volunteers might be exposed. GAP requires risk assessments to be undertaken for each of its placements. Although the standards expected are spatially uneven—a placement in Nepal would not be expected to conform to the same safety standards as one in the UK—all placements must meet certain requirements. GAP's guidelines focus on security, welfare, and safety. Security refers to FCO advice and contingency plans in the event of a serious political or

other disturbance. Welfare has two elements. Physical welfare relates to health and is seen as primarily the responsibility of the volunteer, acting on advice from his or her own doctor. Moral welfare focuses on the volunteer as 'both 'at risk' and 'a risk to others" (GAP, 2000b). Volunteers are given advice concerning their conduct with children in their care, about alcohol, drugs, and sex, and about acceptable standards of behaviour and dress. Safety relates to the conditions of work and accommodation provided. Such practices permit organisations to advertise safety (part of their rationale) and reduce risks of litigation and loss of reputation.

Gap year providers make plans to evacuate their volunteers in emergencies: instances where 'safe' places become 'dangerous'. Although infrequent, GAP has dealt with a coup in Fiji, and SPW with political unrest in Zimbabwe. The logistics of contingency planning are often problematic (in an emergency situation it may be impossible to contact volunteers to tell them to treat the situation as an emergency, for example), but it is crucially important for the organisation. Emergency situations are times when there is greatest risk of adverse publicity if things go wrong. Hence, contingency plans usually involve close liaison with the FCO and also with the parents of the volunteers involved.

In summary, risk management by gap year providers incorporates two elements: risk minimisation, which involves some regulation of young people's experiences; and risk representation, which involves constructing particular places as bearers of particular risks, and constructing young volunteers as having particular capacities to deal with risk. Both are achieved primarily through the provision of 'knowledge' and advice, and the diminution of uncertainty. Together, they amount to mediation of the risk which young people experience. Although relatively little can be done in the face of such risks as bus crashes, gap year providers can reduce some degree of uncertainty, bridging the divide between parents' 'modern' concerns and their children's 'postmodern' aspirations. By using a gap year organisation, young people take chances, not so much as autonomous individuals but as part of a wider network of surveillance and concern.

Experiencing risk in Third World gap year projects

To understand the role of gap years, it is necessary to interrogate the experiences of risk that they provide and to explore how these experiences are shaped by the organisations and valued by participants. Although levels of risk are not high, and are faced everyday by the many millions of people for whom Third World countries are home, gap year volunteers experience risk in a different way in the Third World from the way they experience it in the UK.

Once in their placements all of the volunteers recognised that they faced some physical dangers, although none saw these as an overwhelming element of the experience. In both focus groups, the participants lighted first and most often on what Anna labelled 'people dangers'.

> "There'd been stabbings ... . And the kids can get a bit like—knives come out sometimes, and you've just gotta know when to go, and how to flee" (Claire, Guatemala).

Most could tell (and enjoyed telling) stories of hijackings and murders, particularly those who had visited South Africa.[12] Although it was the danger of physical assault that dominated most accounts, risks associated with transport are statistically a greater threat. These were seemingly less prominent in the minds of the volunteers. This could

[12] For his Masters research, Griffin (2004) asked former gap year participants about their 'favourite stories'. These included mugging and 'terrifying' bus rides, while others reported exhilaration at being liberated from stifling health and safety regulations.

be because they are not prominent in the public discourse of the organisation, or because they receive less media attention,[13] or simply that they are less glamorous to employ in storytelling. The first focus group talked little of risks involved in travel, even when prompted, but the second group were much more forthcoming on their anxieties concerning road and rail transport.

"the rickshaws and taxis in Bombay is mad, anyway, but, and you just kind of close your eyes and it's not too bad. But, um, when you're travelling, the, the roads are in an awful state, and the, the buses and taxis are also in a similar state" (Jane, India).

"I should imagine that if any of those buses were checked, they'd be, may, er, just to look at even, they're falling apart—there's bits coming off them, and the noises they make, and they shake as they go above like 60 or something. Um. Awful. I, I, I remember, I mean, I, I, I hated going on big buses, like, we had to a Dar-es-Salaam up to Moshi route, and, er, it was like, er, 7 hours on the bus, and for that whole 7 hours we were literally counting down the seconds, just thinking" (Anna, Tanzania).

These descriptions of experiencing risk reflect in part a focus-group situation in which stories of fear feed off one another in a near-competitive way. The stories, and the experiences they recall, are also coloured by wider discourses, including the representations produced by gap year providers, and by the media, within the framing metanarrative of adventure. The ways young people perceive and experience risks are inevitably coloured by expectations derived from their own cultural backgrounds. Most gap year participants are white and middle class and the fears they express may reflect anxieties about difference, particularly where difference is racialised. These expectations, as well as those promoted by gap year providers, doubtless also influence the ways in which participants conceptualise and articulate their experiences in a focus group context. However, the descriptions are not simply storytelling in relation to wider narratives: they also evoke real embodied sensations, and a material aspect to the experience of risk.

Gap year providers offer a discursive context that plays a part in constituting young people's experiences of risk. They also play a more material role. The practical role played by gap year providers in mediating experiences of risk was not prominent in the participants' stories. Faced with risks, nonetheless, all of the young people said they appreciated the support of an organisation. The gap year providers helped them deal with risk by providing what they saw as an invisible safety net. In particular, it helped to moderate the effects of distance.

"I had a guy in 'Maritzburg that could get me out of there within—today, if need be" (James, South Africa).

"'So that was a sort of good feeling that you'd got a sort of safety net?'
'Yeah, somewhere a little closer than your family, 8000 miles away' " (Caroline, China).

Although organisations can offer no meaningful protection in the face of dangerous public transport or random violence, volunteers reported that they valued the confidence and reassurance they provided, particularly in the early stages of the placements. Independent visitors to Third World countries cannot constantly rely on experts telling them what they should or should not do, but must make their own decisions concerning the risks they are willing to take. Risk-taking is devolved to the individual. One of the functions performed by gap year providers is to remove some of the responsibility for risk-taking from the individual young person onto

[13] Three British women were killed in a road accident while on gap year placements in Malawi in March 2001, but this received almost no press attention (a short report in each of *The Guardian* and *The Times*, for example). By contrast, murders of British young people in Third World countries hit press and television headlines.

the organisation. Beyond providing local knowledge and advice, their physical presence offered the nebulous material benefit of an invisible safety net. In time, however, the young people became accustomed to the risks they faced.

"I kind of found that, you know, after a while you can worry about so many things, but if you actually just sort of think about like the fact that malaria ... over there it's like a common cold" (Anna, Tanzania).

"I think you just get used to it, and in the end I didn't worry at all. In the end it didn't feel risky" (Jane, India).

As the organisation's role as a perceived safety net progressively diminished, most of the focus group participants ultimately felt confident to take their leave and go travelling independently:

"by the end of the six months we probably didn't need it so much, so that, by the time we went travelling, we didn't really notice that, you know, we were on our own" (Jane, India).

The stories of the focus-group participants suggest that, while the gap year providers had not removed or controlled all of the risks of living in a Third World country, they had played some role in offering reassurance. There was a consensus in both groups that risk was an unavoidable part of the experience of a gap year project. Furthermore, not to have faced these risks would have diminished the authenticity of the experience:

"to live with an Indian family and teach in a school, whatever, but then to have your own private car to drive you places—it wouldn't have been real, would it? I mean, it was, like, all part of the culture, and part of the reason that I came. Part of the experience" (Jane, India).

"Without risk in South Africa, it's just not South Africa! You know, without all these things happening, I mean, you might as well be back here" (James, South Africa).

"There was lots of risks. Not the nicest parts, but—it is, yeah, I don't know, I think it was all part of it, really" (Anna, Tanzania).

Spatialised representations of risk were again invoked in explaining the need to experience risk.

In summary, gap year participants' experiences of risk are both discursive and embodied. Risk is not wholeheartedly embraced as excitement and adventure. It adds authenticity within an adventure narrative, embeds people in a place, but is 'not the nicest part'. Risk has an ambiguous materiality: representations of risk differ from objective experiences of misfortune, but representations themselves produce (or reduce) embodied fear and thus impact on more young participants than does material misfortune. While Elsrud (2001, page 603) emphasises the need for risk to be approached in the right way by travellers: "[a] strong character is not generated through facing the risk with whining, shivering, and crying", the Brunel focus group participants were not embarrassed to talk positively of the roles of organisations in giving them confidence.[14] For them, the structure they were provided with was valuable in confronting perceived risk. Thus, the gap year providers mediated young people's experiences, not only through risk minimisation and risk representation but also through their physical existence, which provides an 'invisible safety net' that quells participants' fears and ultimately gives them the confidence to become more autonomous.

[14] There is perhaps a gender dimension to this: there was only one male participant in each focus group, hence neither needed to perform a masculine identity for a male audience. This may explain the willingness of the participants to voice a more fearful view of risk-taking.

Concluding discussion: gap year projects, risk, spatiality, and contemporary social change

Research in both youth transitions and travel/tourism has identified seemingly paradoxical trends: a continued modernising tendency toward risk avoidance, commodification and structuring of the life course, alongside a postmodern embrace of individuality, difference, and uncertainty (Lash and Urry, 1994). In this paper I have argued that gap year projects sit at the juncture between these trends, and, through mobilising spatially uneven risk, they mediate between them.

In relation to youth transitions, Third World gap year volunteers appear to elect a particularly abrupt transition to adulthood, gaining experiences dramatically different from those they previously knew. However, despite the distance young people put between themselves and their homes, they do not instantly become autonomous adults. Providers do not treat their charges as 'fully adult', and provide a service to parents as well as to their young volunteers, reflective of an increasingly blurred dichotomy between dependence and independence (Jones and Wallace, 1992), that supports 'active individualisation' (Evans and Heinz, 1994).

Gap years also mediate tensions in societal attitudes to young people and risk. On the one hand, UK society embraces adventure (and risk) as valuable resources for the construction of young people's individualised biographies: encountering and conquering risk represent aspects of a 'successful' transition to adulthood (Desforges, 2000). On the other hand, young adults are increasingly infantilised and protected within a discourse of risk anxiety and control (Furedi, 2001). Gap year providers fulfil a perceived need to control and represent risk to which young people may be exposed, to allow them to perform 'adventure' in a societally acceptable way.

In relation to tourism research, gap years contrast with the usual focus of youth-centred concerns: backpacking and independent travel. Much as Thomas Cook in the 19th century took the perceived risks out of European travel (Lash and Urry, 1994), gap year providers today shape both actual and perceived risks for young volunteers. The balance of freedom and structure that they provide juxtaposes divergent trends toward independent and highly regulated forms of travel.

Mediation between modern and postmodern tendencies in contemporary social transformation is achieved through the mobilisation of spatially uneven risk narratives and materialities. It is this spatiality that is of particular geographical interest. Gap year providers send young people to dispersed locations in distant continents with different cultural expectations and legislative frameworks. With globalisation, more young people can travel relatively cheaply to such places, escaping nationally bounded constraints of 'risk society' to expose themselves to risks that will afford them valued currency back home where, in spite (or because) of increased risk anxiety, the grand narrative of adventure validates their experiences (Desforges, 2000). However, pressures within society, particularly expressed through parents, require that these risks be controlled.[15] Gap year providers therefore commodify experiences of risk, packaging 'challenge with security', for which the privileged are willing to pay.

The technologies that allow young people to perform individualised transitions to adulthood across a dramatically expanded spatial range also allow ever-greater surveillance and control at the global level. Regardless of the physical distance young people put between themselves and home, gap year providers, to a degree, bring even the most distant spaces within the ambit of a Western adult gaze (for a discussion of risk and surveillance see Castel, 1991). At one level, this is achieved through the provision of

[15] It is important to recognise the power relations involved in managing risk across spatial/cultural boundaries. Through risk mediation, the West can 'exploit' risk in Third World for its own ends while doing nothing to diminish the experience of risk for those exposed to it every day.

knowledge concerning places and placements to young people, their parents, and society more widely. Through provision of knowledge, gap year providers reduce uncertainty and thereby some of the risk to which volunteers are exposed (along with some of the adventure). Gap year projects also bring 'uncontrolled' risks under the umbrella of Western 'risk society' through self-discipline and the internalisation of control. Rather than engaging in autonomous decision making concerning risks, young people take with them a template to follow. This may in part reflect a concern that young people are too young to make important decisions for themselves: that they should not be permitted to put themselves at risk.

The mediation of risk by gap year providers is not, however, totalising control. Gap year projects offer a degree of predictability and control, but this is far from complete. Gap year providers can do little to diminish most actual risks that confront their volunteers. A gap year project is not a 'fairground' version of living in the Third World—the thrills without the physical dangers. Furthermore, the amount of support available from providers can in practice be quite low, many having only one representative of the organisation for an entire country: "to some extent there is recognition that this low level of support from organisations is what a gap year is all about, and that the level of financial contribution made by participants is insufficient to cover the greater costs of a more nanny-like structure" (Jones, 2004, page 85). The perception of relative safety that is offered might in fact liberate young people to visit distant places, and put 'real' distance between themselves and their parents or other familiar authority figures. To some extent, then, structured gap year placements can allow young people to exercise considerable autonomy.[16]

Gap year projects, in summary, commodify a form of youth transition that is valuable to middle-class youth and that permits intergenerational transmission of class in an individualising world. Gap years mediate between modernising, risk-averse trends in society (expressed particularly through parents) and postmodern, risk-embracing, individualising trends (expressed through youth), not by adopting a midway compromise but by selectively representing and controlling elements of spatially uneven risk. This enables young people to draw on the resources both of their parents and of Third World environments to forge distinctive identities in late-modern Britain.

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[16] Gap year projects might also be compared with independent travel in the Third World. Here, too, experience is mediated: many young people travelling 'independently' remain tied to a *Rough Guide* or *Lonely Planet* book, permitting their travels to be structured by others. Young people on a placement may in fact have the support they need to be more independent, autonomous, and less bound by structure than those using a guidebook, although many, of course, combine a structured placement with guidebook-led travel.

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