Sociological perspectives on risk assessment in pregnancy

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3 lenses on risk

- Cultural views of risk and birth
- Women’s views of risk
- Structural conditions that affect risk
Ideas of “risk society”

- Risk as primary organizing principle in modern society
- “systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself”
  - Beck 1999
- “society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk”
  - Giddens 1992
Risk Society and birth

- “manufactured risks”
- Contemporary organization of maternity care reflects risk society
Birth in American culture

- Popular culture depicts birth as dangerous
- Scenes of chaos, pain
- Birthing woman as irrational, out of control
- Emphasis on pain
Authoritative knowledge
Views of maternal-fetal relationship

- Increasingly, dominant paradigm of conflict in the maternal-fetal relationship
- Consequences for how we view pregnant woman—mistrust, suspicion
Polarization in views of risk

- Diametrically opposed “models” of birth
- Birth is a physiological process that contains the potential for pathology; it is not either/or.
Women’s perceptions of risk

- Fear
- Emphasis on being safe
- Distrust of body
- Desire for control
- Women’s perceptions of risk different from medical evaluations of risk
What does it mean to feel safe?

- Variation in perceptions of safety
- Hospital as safe vs. hospital as risky
Multiple dimensions of control

- Self-determination
- Respect
- Personal security
- Attachment
- Knowledge
Importance of trust
The role of structure

- Problems with transport and transfer in current American environment *increase* risk in some settings
  - Lack system of hand-offs
  - Intrapartum transfer morally fraught

- Netherlands and UK provide counter-examples
  - Obstetrics indication list in Netherlands
Areas for research

- Cultural:
  - Societal debate on “good birth”—and where/how to make good births happen as often as possible

- Consumer:
  - Where do women’s expectations of birth come from?

- Structure: how to reduce risk in all settings
  - Reduce unnecessary interventions in hospitals
  - Improve systems of transport and transfer