

Actors and Risk: Trade-offs between Risk Governance and Securitization Theory

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Risk governance and securitization theory are generally thought to offer competing or even incompatible perspectives on risk. Correspondingly, assumptions concerning the actors involved in risk management differ. In risk governance, assumptions about the actor are primarily related to differing conceptions of rationality. In securitization theory, the assumptions relate more closely to the way in which social position and power relations shape the formation of meaning.

Despite these and other differences, this article argues that both theories are useful to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers as they expose different dynamics in issues of risk and security and provide alternative explanations of them. By comparing assumptions about actors' behavior in the two theories the article describes a framework of trade-offs. Treating the differing actor assumptions as trade-offs can enrich empirical study, where risk policy, discourses, governance, and security processes are intertwined in complex relationships, and both rational actions and meaning formations are indispensable to understanding and coping with compound societal challenges.

Keywords: risk, securitization, risk governance, risk analysis, actor theories, agency

1. Introduction

All conceptualizations of risk have one characteristic in common, that of contingency, i.e., the distinction among possible actions. Individuals and societies face choices, choose actions and pathways in response, create meaning, and organize themselves to cope with uncertainties, future events, and threats. Risk governance and securitization theory describe decision making in response to risk and threats, operating with comparable categories of actors, namely those who govern and those who are governed. Both perspectives are used to understand similar issues, including climate risk, which is highly politicized and characterized by ambiguity. However, risk governance and securitization theory exhibit different behavioral assumptions concerning the actors in the processes they describe. This article reviews different assumptions to identify salient trade-offs for use in future research on risk. Developing a framework to compare trade-offs may enrich future empirical studies in which both rationality

and meaning formation are useful for explaining societal responses to complex issues, such as climate change.

Risk governance falls in the tradition of the regulatory sciences, policy analysis, risk assessment, and risk management. It investigates complex, interacting sets of actors and organizations in which decisions are taken regarding risk (Boholm and Corvellec 2011; Renn 2008; van Asselt and Renn 2011). Securitization theory was developed by the Copenhagen School, within the international relations' branch of security studies after the end of the Cold War (Buzan, Wilde, and Wæver 1998). This approach investigates the ways in which certain threats become the focus of security concerns or are ignored, examining speech acts, contemporary political communications, and/or governmental practices and processes (Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016; Williams 2003).

Increased focus on climate change, migration, and terrorism has given the field of risk analysis and international relations shared empirical

themes. The concept of risk has gradually entered the field of security, which has, in response, changed its approach to threats (Aradau and Munster 2008; Gad and Petersen 2011; Petersen 2012). These tendencies have brought the fields closer (Corry 2012; Petersen 2012). However, risk governance and securitization theory are often thought to have competing or incompatible perspectives on risk (Corry 2012; Renn 2008).

The article falls into seven sections. The methodology, presented in the subsequent section, is followed by a description of three sets of behavioral assumptions in the social sciences. In the fourth and fifth sections, we present behavioral assumptions in risk governance and securitization theory. In the sixth section, we discuss the trade-offs between the two theories' assumptions. The last section contains the conclusion.

2. Methodology

We base our theoretical review of actor assumptions in risk governance and securitization theory on actor models from the social sciences. In each theory section we have focused on research provided by prominent theorists and critics, including Renn (2008) and Aven (2020) for risk governance and Buzan et al. (1998) and Balzacq (2005, 2011, 2015, 2019; Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016) for securitization theory. The risk governance literature includes conceptual studies of risk analysis on a societal level, empirical frameworks, and practical recommendations for decision making, including the International Risk Governance Council Framework (IRGC). Conceptual studies of risk governance concur with the theoretical and methodological foundations of risk and risk analysis. Securitization theory encompasses studies emphasizing the role of language in understanding security issues (see Buzan, Wilde, and Wæver 1998), and studies emphasizing the role of security practices (see Balzacq 2005, 2015; Balzacq, Léonard, and Ruzicka 2016). The former approach is sometimes called the linguistic strand of securitization theory, and the latter the sociological strand (Ibid.). Nuances between these strands will be pointed out when relevant for explaining actors' behavior.

3. Actor Models in the Social Sciences

In this section, we present three groups of actor models. These are rational action theory (Elster 2016), theories of agents, structures, and constraints (for example Giddens 1984) and post-structuralist theories (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Actor models provide explanations of social phenomena and mechanisms that are constituted or influenced by the actions of individuals or groups. An actor is presumed to act from mental frameworks, so the model design incorporates the presentation of these mental frameworks. The dominant position in the social sciences is that reason-based explanations are also causal explanations (Wilson and Shpall 2016).

3.1 Rational Action Theory

Rationality means acting in a reasonable manner from one's beliefs, purposes and goals (Dray 1966, 106). Rational action theory is divided into thin and thick theory, both of which apply to the actions of individuals or collectives, the latter as collective decisions or as aggregated individual decisions (Elster 2016).

Thin rational action theory proposes that an action proceeding from a belief, desire, or preference is rational if there is consistency within a system of beliefs, desires, and preferences (Elster 2016). Thick rational action theory proposes "that acting rationally means acting consistently on beliefs and desires that are not only consistent, but also rational" (Elster 2016, 15). Here, beliefs are rational, that is, well-founded, if they are supported by the available evidence (Føllesdal 1982, 305). Well-foundedness is a normative assumption that is closely related to rationality as a norm. Føllesdal (1982) characterizes human beings as seeking to be rational. When they are instead irrational, due to incomplete knowledge, for example, they adjust their beliefs, attitudes, and actions toward rationality, if possible. Rational action theory assumes that actors maximize their utility and act rationally by seeking to satisfy their desires based on their well-founded beliefs (Elster 2016).

3.2 Agents, Structures, and Constraints

Institutions are not only instruments for the satisfaction of preferences; they cultivate and correlate actors' behavior as well (O'Neill 2007). Although institutions provide a social structure,

they do not entail a deterministic view of society. Social structures are produced and reproduced by reflexive actors (Giddens 1984). Social structures, including those provided by institutions, are important, but they necessarily leave room for the actor to make choices and express agency. One way that actors can shape institutions is through deliberate democracy. The Habermasian understanding of communicative rationality makes a significant contribution to models of deliberative democracy, accounting for how “speakers coordinate their action and pursuit of individual (or joint) goals on the basis of a shared understanding that the goals are inherently reasonable or merit-worthy” (Bohman and Rehg 2017, n.p.).

3.3 Poststructuralist Actor Theories

Poststructuralist theories consider the actor to be a product of the encompassing structures, although the existence of these structures may not be evident. Althusser (1971) considers that the actor is constructed through a process of interpellation, in which language forms the individual’s social position and thereby makes it into an ideological subject. Poststructuralist theories have evolved from this structuralist position by considering meaning to be in flux. Because language is fundamentally unstable, meaning can never be permanently fixed (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). In discursive struggles over meaning, dominant ways of speaking and understanding the social world emerge, and language becomes temporarily fixed (Ibid.). Thus, language is ultimately arbitrary and reflects particular ways of understanding the world, which constitute discourses (Ibid.). These have the potential to structure social reality in meaning.

4. Basic Assumptions About Actors in Risk Governance

Rational action theory prescribes how risk problems should be managed, and institutions form the structures that enable or constrain the response of the actors to the problem. Institutions can also to some extent create or decide the risk problems. See Table 1 for a summary of assumptions regarding actors in risk governance.

4.1 Who Are Actors?

In risk governance, actors are those involved in the management of a risk and those affected by it (Aven 2020; Renn 2008). The former group includes governments, bureaucracies, private businesses, industry organizations, and public institutions. The latter are stakeholders and public groups, which are vital for legitimate risk handling processes. The use of the term governance rather than government emphasizes inclusion, as it acknowledges that both those who govern and those who are governed are indispensable.

4.2 General Characteristics of the Actors in Risk Governance

In risk governance, rational action theory calls for actors to act rationally to solve risk problems together. Rational action models are strongly associated with methodological individualism, which fundamentally claims that social phenomena are to be explained by showing them as the result of an aggregate of individual actions. Individual actions, in turn, are explicable with reference to the intentional states that motivate the individual actors (Elster 1989).

4.2.1 Rationality

Knowledge of risk is considered to be justified belief (Aven 2020, 24). Thus, in risk governance, rationality is considered thick. Føllesdal’s description of the well-foundedness of beliefs includes whether it is rational to seek for additional evidence. This factor is also present in risk governance, where a risk assessment should include more data collection if there is epistemic uncertainty (Aven 2020; Renn 2008).

Furthermore, risk governance features rationality of action. Here, the actor makes the best use of resources, information, and the ability to create alternatives (Føllesdal 1982, 307). Here, a weak form of rationality is assumed. A strong form would allow choosing from all imaginable resources, information, and alternatives. Risk problems can be linear, complex, uncertain, or ambiguous, and for each, there are applicable management strategies (Renn 2008, 182). This categorization allows the correct solutions to be found more efficiently, so it is not necessary for every decision to pass through all possible alternatives (Aven 2020; Renn 2008).

Finally, there is a third form of thick rationality in risk governance, namely, the well-foundedness of values. This is a form of normative rationality, implying a rational justification of norms and values. Risk describes a possible event, its consequences, and its uncertainties (Aven 2020, 58). Intersubjective values need to be in place to determine if an event is good or bad, and to which degree. For a value to be intersubjective, it must be justified and is therefore well-founded. In particular, the well-foundedness of values plays a vital part in solving risk problems that feature ambiguity, or that give “rise to several meaningful and legitimate interpretations of accepted risk assessments results” (Renn 2008, 77). The interpretation of the problems can be ambiguous, and the normative judgement of them can be as well. This category of problem may be solved by deliberation and through communicative rationality, values, priorities, and assumptions can be agreed upon (Aven 2020; Renn 2008).

In these forms of rationality, assumptions explain both an actor’s behavior while confronting a risk governance issue and how that actor should behave. These normative aspects allow not only theoretical approaches but also concrete recommendations for responses to risk problems.

4.3 Characteristics of Social Structures

Risk management and governance together form a set of actions, strategies, routines, and practices intended to shape the future, but they are also dependent on, influenced by, and embedded in institutional structures. The resulting duality in risk governance, where modern institutions both create and resolve risk problems, means that assumptions are needed to explain how institutions can create risk behavior. Thus, assumptions are necessary regarding the actor model agents, structures, and constraints. Certainly, the persistent use of probability in risk analysis indicates the belief in a set of social structures, since probabilities, which allow for intersubjective rational assessments, depend on a stable context. It must be assumed therefore that there is a stable and (partly) determined future (Patomäki 2015); this is warranted if prevailing institutions can shape future beliefs, desires, and behavior.

The generic risk management consists of the following five steps: generation, assessment,

evaluation and selection, implementation, and monitoring and assessment of the options and feedback (Renn 2008, 177). The best strategy for this depends on the state and quality of the knowledge available on the risk (Ibid., 74). The categorization of knowledge of risk problems and solutions to overcome risk challenges rests upon the institutional foundation that structures society. Indeed, the same institutions structure governance and facilitate dialogue and stakeholder involvement. Thus, they provide the conditions for communicative rationality for addressing ambiguous risk problems.

5. Basic Assumptions About Actors in Securitization Theory

Securitization theory adopts a poststructuralist model of the actor, taking language and position as essential. However, discussions of actors’ responsibilities (Floyd 2014, 2019) in relation to securitization moves suggest that actors make choices and are accordingly accountable, echoing assumptions from theories featuring agents, structures, and constraints as well. See Table 1 for a summary.

5.1 Who Are Actors?

In Buzan et al.’s (1998) seminal book *Security: A new framework for analysis*, actors are grouped into these categories: 1) securitizing actor, 2) audience, 3) referent object, 4) referent subject, and 5) functional actors. 1) The securitizing actor “performs the security speech act” by which an issue becomes securitized (Ibid., 40). 2) The audience either accepts or rejects the assertion of an existential threat to the referent object (Ibid., 34). 3) referent object is what is under threat, whether a physical object, an individual, or a group, and it must have a legitimate claim to survival (Ibid., 36). 4) The referent subject is the threat itself, which can be anything from an antagonist state to the general idea of climate migrants. 5) A functional actor significantly influences decisions in the field but is neither the securitizing actor nor the referent object (Ibid., 36).

5.2 General Characteristics of the Actor

Buzan et al. (1998) anticipate challenges to their identification of actors and level of analysis. They adopt methodological collectivism to respond to

these (Ibid., 40). They suggest that individual speakers are authoritative representatives of collectives, and the social position of the actor is crucial for whether a speech act is successful. This has led to debate over what role different types of actors play, how they play it, and their relative importance, especially regarding securitizing actors and the audience (Ciută 2009).

5.2.1 Characteristics of the Securitizing Actor

To identify the characteristics of securitizing actors, Balzacq (2019) frames them as the elites, namely, minority groups in society with a privileged position. This follows poststructuralist theory, according to which elites use the production of meaning to stabilize and naturalize power relations until they become so common-sense as to be beyond questioning (Gramsci 1971). This implies the presence of social structures that hold power before the advent of political processes. Having such a position in the social structure allows a securitizing actor to make a securitizing move.

Léonard and Kaunert (2010) argue that the securitizing actor may not be a member of the elites but could be equivalent to Kingdon's policy entrepreneurs, who, "having been waiting for a policy to open, they seize the opportunity ... to propose, lobby for, and sell a specific policy proposal" (Ibid., 68). Such entrepreneurs have "one of three sources: expertise, an ability to speak for others, or an authoritative decision-making position" (Kingdon in Léonard and Kaunert 2010, 68). However, Diez, Lucke, and Wellmann (2016) argue that this conceptualization grants the securitizing actors too much room for maneuver, as the actors are more constrained by their institutional and discursive context.

Floyd (2016) proposes a third characterization of the securitizing actor, where the actor's action must have the ability to create a securitization directly. Floyd, thus, creates a primary condition for a securitizing speech act, namely, that the actor has the legitimate power to act, thus significantly reducing who can be called a securitizing actor. Buzan et al.'s (1998) original view is that the actor's position is the condition for a successful securitizing speech act, but they do not argue that the position requires any power to act beyond producing the speech act.

In securitization theory there are questions such as whether securitization can be/is ever morally required due to certain features of the threat (Floyd 2014, 2019). It is notable that the presence of a normative aspect in securitization theory and any moral claim of responsibility for actions implies that the actor enjoys a certain amount of agency for which he/she can be held accountable. Hence, actors influence the structure they operate within.

5.2.2 Characteristics of the Audience

According to securitization theory, a securitizing actor is dependent on the acceptance by an audience of the view he or she is presenting on a (security) issue. An intersubjective adaptation of threat construction is thus necessary (Balzacq 2005, 2011, 2015, 2019). Adding further nuance to the role of the audience, Léonard and Kaunert (2010) argue that there are multiple audiences that can be accounted for with differing logics, though all are linked in one political processes. Another characteristic of the audience is that it can provide formal and/or moral support (Balzacq 2005). Often, public opinion offers moral support, but only audiences with relevant decision capabilities can provide formal support. Despite these multiple depictions of the role of the audience in securitization, it remains unclear.

5.3 Characteristics of the Social Structure

Securitization theory indicates that different actors have unequal abilities to influence whether an issue becomes a security issue. However, critics have pointed out that speech acts alone cannot account for securitization of an issue or warrant the assertion of a causal connection between a speech act and securitization (Balzacq 2005, 2011, 2019). To respond to this, the field of practice approach, often called the sociological variant of securitization, is proposed. It enables scholars to include other dimensions than language, such as habitual acts or tools.

Fields of practices are embedded within a regime of practices that govern the cognitive, practical, and political influence of a field (Balzacq 2019, 340). A regime of practice features a specific way of seeing, thinking and questioning, acting, and forming a self (Ibid., 339). The study of regimes of practices accounts for these four dimensions and how they

interrelate, using analyses of both linguistic and non-verbal practices.

The way in which the elements that make up regimes of practices are weaved together is called the *dispositif* (Balzacq 2011, 2019). These elements can consist of “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements ... The dispositive itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (Focault in Balzacq 2011, 2).

6. Discussion

We have discussed how actors form beliefs and meaning according to the two theories and how these are acted upon. In this section, we identify the trade-offs between risk governance and securitization theory, where to look for them, and why it is important to do so.

6.1 What Are the Trade-offs?

The trade-offs between theories of risk governance and securitization occur in the intersection between rational and strategic

actions, meaning formation and sense making. For example, in response to climate risks, actors create and implement strategies related to the risk problem and adopt measures that are justified and adequate to the threat.

Risk governance theory, at its core, describes rational management of the natural and social world. Hence, the basic actor assumptions given in Table 1 are related to forms of rationality. As assumption 5 shows, risk governance provides an objective foundation for rational explanations, but it finds its assessment and management of risks on assumptions 1–3. As assumption 4 notes, risk governance proposes communicative rationality, where other forms of rationality fall short. Following these assumptions, risk governance explains why certain risks emerge or dissolve based on features of the world, and suggest ways that a society can manage such risks.

The core of securitization theory relates to structures and processes (Balzacq 2015). Here, the basic actor assumptions are strongly linked to how the social structure influences the actor’s worldview.

	Risk governance	Securitization theory
Definition of main actors	Risk analysts and managers, organizations, businesses, governments, and stakeholders	Elites, audiences, policy entrepreneurs, agents whose actions directly constitute securitization, and those who are in a position of power
Basic assumptions about actors	Rational and intentional, but limited by lack of knowledge and resources: 1. Actors base their judgment on well-founded beliefs, values and rational actions 2. Actors have the power to produce intended outcomes 3. Actors can be limited by social structures, but they have multiple options. Actors have agency, which is seldom totally constrained 4. Actors choose the best solution available through communicative rationality 5. Actors hold certain features as risks influenced by an external world (objectivism about rational explanations)	Seeking self-interest and meaning: 1. Actors claim that there is an existential threat based on subjective meaning formation 2. Actors have the power to securitize an issue and thus have agency which they can be held accountable for 3. Actors play roles given by social structures, and seek to preserve or change the power relations 4. Actors express their securitization move in terms of linguistic and non-verbal practices 5. Actors hold certain features as threats influenced by an external world (constructivism about facts)
Knowledge of risk/threat understood as	Estimated uncertainties and risk descriptions	Regimes of practice, the <i>dispositif</i> , and intersubjective meaning formation

Table 1: Trade-offs between actor assumptions in risk governance and securitization theory

As assumptions 1 and 5 suggest, individual perceptions of risk or threats are not neutral or objective but follow an intersubjective interpretation of reality. Assumptions 2 and 3 describe how existing power relations shape this interpretation. Assumption 4 explains the means by which risk and security issues are formed and dispersed. The actor assumptions enable securitization theory to explain how meaning is formed, the way in which power relations influence meaning formation, and the role language and practices play in the emergence and dissolution of threats and risks.

6.2 Where to Look for Trade-offs?

As Table 1 suggests, trade-offs occur inside institutions and structures where speech acts and risk governance actors perform and where dialogue, communication and power relations are played out.

Risk governance and the sociological approach to securitization theory converge on the view of an external world that can explain why communities consider certain elements to be threats (objectivism about rational explanations) while there are also elements of intersubjective representation of that reality (constructivism about facts). Securitization theory tends to highlight the latter, while risk governance the former.

Still, the fact of shared ontological assumptions leads to the supposition that trade-offs occur at different theoretical levels, namely, the epistemological and the methodological. Epistemological trade-offs are those indicated to explain objectivism about rational explanations and constructivism about facts. Securitization theory relies on methodological collectivism, while risk governance calls for methodological individualism.

6.3 Why Look for Trade-offs?

Acknowledging trade-offs enables a more nuanced understanding of the ways that risk and security policies develop and evolve because distinct actor assumptions affect how shared empirical issues within risk and security are approached and discussed.

Second, these trade-offs can identify which factors encourage, motivate, and form the behavior of security and risk governance actors to establish their influence in decision-making.

Third, and particularly relevant for policymakers, trade-offs can pinpoint which factors explain why certain policy measures succeed and others fail each time that a risk or a threat is handled.

7. Conclusion

The paper finds several trade-offs in the behavioral assumptions of risk governance and securitization theory. In the former, actors seek to fulfill their individual desires and adjust their beliefs when doing so is rational. In securitization theory, the actors' desires are prescribed by the society and the practices they take part in. These trade-offs create the foundation for an alliance, but this should not be mistaken for a theoretical merger. Applying both theories to empirical research must be a balancing exercise, because the assumptions in Table 1 are complementary, not compatible. Indeed, distinct actor assumptions enable diverse explanations of risk and security processes. Treating these assumptions as trade-offs may enrich empirical studies in which risk policy, discourses, governance, and security processes are intertwined in complex relationships. In these relationships, rational actions and meaning formations are indispensable to understand complex societal challenges.

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