THE POLITICS OF ASBESTOS

Understandings of Risk, Disease and Protest

Linda Waldman
Asbestos

- a generic term for fibrous rocks
- found in different forms - white (chrysotile), blue (crocidolite) and brown (amosite)
- can be spun into thread and woven into cloth, is fireproof, has insulating qualities, is resistant to corrosion, unattractive to vermin, lightweight, indestructible, electrically non-productive
An "indispensable" and "magic" mineral

Used in: ship insulation; cement sheeting and roofing, pipes (including water pipes), brake linings, vinyl floors, fire curtains, conveyor belts, ropes, mattresses, rubber, cigarette filters, gas masks, gloves, filters for food (rice, salt, beer, fruit juice); dish towels, dental amalgam, banknotes, domestic ovens, pianos, ironing boards, clothing (berets, aprons), carpets, table mats, tampons, mail bags, surgical thread, toothpaste, children's toys (dolls, playdough, crayons), talcum powder, condoms …
Asbestos causes mesothelioma, lung cancer, asbestosis, pleural thickening and pleural plaques.

For all asbestos-related diseases, there is a 20-30 year delay between exposure and the onset of disease.

Treatment for all asbestos diseases is very limited.

Mesothelioma is the most serious and debilitating.

Pleural plaques are largely described as ‘benign’ (Mossman and Gee, 1989)
Framings of Asbestos and Disease

Framings ‘impose discipline on unruly events by creating understandable causal relationships, identifying agents of harmful behaviour, and finding solutions that convey a sense of security and moral order’ (Jasanoff, 2005, 24).

- Official/dominant framings of risk tend to exaggerate formulaic, scientific calculation of likelihoods and outcomes, and downplay situations where knowledge about outcomes or likelihood is not clearly defined (Stirling, 2009, Scoones et al, 2007).

- Alternative, knowledge framings emphasise other ‘cultural assumptions, meanings and life-worlds’ (Leach et.al. 2007, 8).
Dominant Framings

**UK**
All asbestos is dangerous but controllable. Asbestos embedded in buildings is low risk.

Pleural plaques benign, symptomless and unrelated to the risk of contracting other ARDs. These claims undermine UK societal and civic values.
India

Chrysotile asbestos is safe. Therefore asbestos risks are minimal or non-existent, and can be controlled through production methods.
South Africa

- All asbestos is carcinogenic and must be banned.
- Asbestos substitutes need to be found without job losses.
- Asbestos embedded in buildings is low risk.
- Asbestos mines need to be rehabilitated because of environmental and health concerns.
Rely primarily on scientific calculations of risk,

Science alone did not determine how asbestos issues were interpreted and responded to; framings were also influenced by other political processes and powerful actors.

Largely excluded social and environmental perspectives

This type of state administration of expert knowledge has led to undemocratic governmental practices and the marginalization of citizens (cf. Jasanoff, 1996, 2009).
**UK**

- Heightened awareness that in situ asbestos might be lethal, with inadequate legislative protection.
- Pleural plaques are an occupational disease and precursor of other ARDs; brings in understandings of history, particularly of industrialization and class issues.
- The HSE over-reacts and over-emphasizes the dangers of asbestos.
- A reframing of anxiety.
India

- There is conclusive scientific proof that chrysotile is dangerous,

- Political and economic vested interests perpetuate asbestos production.

- Other neighbouring countries are listening to victims’ voices and responding appropriately.
**South Africa**

- Environmentalism and occupational health are luxuries that Africa cannot afford.

- Sufficient scientific evidence exists to prove that white asbestos is safe, and there is no scientific evidence that asbestos substitutes are safe,
a wide variety of, sometimes contradictory, framings, some of which are heavily invested in ‘expert’ science and in the ‘rational’ production of scientific calculations of risk

- Emphasize different values, introduce ambiguity, uncertainty and project social and environmental concerns.

- They also illustrate the importance of context, of national policy processes and of diverse actors’ positioning.
Technical advisory councils, court proceedings, regulatory assessments, scientific controversies provide illustrations of the practice of democracy.

The forms of expertise recognized in particular countries are themselves culturally shaped and vary from country to country (Jasanoff, 2003).

The juxtaposing of dominant and alternative framing of asbestos issues thus reflects a combination of political culture, national context and national styles of decision-making.
UK & India: Knowledge Societies

- Casting expert knowledge as unproblematic obscures the relationship between knowledge and power.

- Risk regulation asks whether asbestos is ‘safe’. Ideas about what constitutes ‘safe’ have been narrowly defined by experts and governments.

- Encouraging citizen participation forces activists to engage with science and the language of risk regulation to challenge dominant framings.

- Fails to examine ambiguity (between different kinds of disease), ignores comparisons of who is harmed and how.
South Africa: degree of suspicion of science

- A strong desire for reconstruction and a concern to give the poor ‘ownership’ of their development

- Scope for non-expert voices to be heard in policy and a broadening out of knowledge to encompass disadvantaged and marginalized perspectives.

- Such knowledge is far more contingent, diverse, ambiguous and relational.
In Conclusion:

- Science is positioned at the intersection between corporate, political and activist interests.
- Medical and technological framings tend to be less contentious than social and environmental ones.
- Avoid questions of responsibility, accountability and regulation by focusing on the individual.
- Alternative framings often seek to emulate and undermine scientific strategies of dominant framings while introducing other considerations.
Thank you