

New Insights of Risk Perception Research

Mini symposia at the 'SRA World Congress of Risk', Brussels, June 25, 2003

Advances in science and technology have accelerated the speed of technological change and extended the scope and magnitude of human interventions into nature and everyday life. These processes require major efforts to assess, control, mitigate or avoid adverse consequences to contemporary and future human life.

However, it seems not to be sufficient for responsible risk policy, to rely on the magnitude of expected losses. First, because dissensions of experts determining risks occur. Second, because innovative deployments may lead to unexpected side effects that point to the limits of traditional knowledge. Essentially, the understanding of what are desired or undesired outcomes, is strongly linked to one's standpoint: the notion of risk, their assessment and acceptability are based on social preferences. Therefore, to ask the question to the social conditions of risk perception, valuation and acceptance is anything else than trivial.

Decades of intense research have created insights in a couple of basic concepts in risk perception. However, consensus on what risk valuation and acceptance depends on, is still missing. Potential determinants are 'psychometric' risk characteristics like catastrophe potential, dread, controllability or voluntariness of risk taking. Under certain circumstances, some risks may appear exceedingly hazardous; this can evoke a stigmatization and the subsequent avoidance of places, products or technologies. The degree of trust in institutions, occupied with risk regulation and control may influence risk acceptance as well. Human preferences refer to value orientations: in which the ones' expect benefits, the others' fear detriments. Finally, socio-demographic characteristics like age, sex, the affiliation to occupational or confessional groups may influence risk perception, valuation and the willingness to tolerate risks.

On the basis of recent empirical studies the explanation power of the different theoretical concepts explaining the public's risk acceptance, is analyzed and discussed. In a second step our mini symposia offers the chance to discuss the meaning of the insights for future risk communication and risk policy.