

## **Abstract of Meeting Paper**

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### **Risk as Perceived by the Public: Disparities of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings**

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**Conference Topic:** Opening the process: Integrating stake-holders and stakeholders

**Issue:** Risk perception

**Designation:** Oral session

Facing globalized markets and international competition, the German public is thought to be risk-timid, opposing to innovative but probably risky technologies, and is sometimes made responsible for economic deficiency.

Findings of the Baden-Wuerttemberg Risk Survey, carried out in 2001, however indicate rather scepticism, uncertainty and ambivalence towards technologies and their risks than resentments or even hostility. In particular, nuclear power plants, genetically modified food, BSE, and the global climatic change seem to evoke some public demurs.

Qualitative analyses however indicate, that survey findings on risk perception and valuation may lead to overestimation and misleading consequences. Answers to open questions show that the public's focus on risks relies much more on ›normal risks‹ than on hazards emerging from new ›external‹ technologies: The center of public attention come across everyday-life risks like traffic accidents, hazards to economic reproduction, health risks or dangers to primary social networks, people belong to. The public's semantic of ›risk‹ is related rather to these few omnipresent hazards than to more distal and somehow abstract risks. Particularly, in qualitative interviews, technological risks play a marginal role.

The disparity between qualitative and quantitative risk semantics is caused first by economic and political interests and funding of specific studies: The interest of these institutions is mainly focussed on the perception and the publics' acceptability of social and in particular technological risks. The second reason is related to the design of questionnaires: External framing of risk-topics combined with listwise query of evaluating

risks will evoke judgements even if certain risks are hardly relevant to an interviewee. This observation leads me to talk of ›switching risks‹, that are only set to one's agenda if externally framed: for instance by tv news, within a discussion amongst friends, during an election campaign, or if somebody asks to respond a questionnaire. On the other hand, risk semantics emerging from open questions or qualitative interviews refer to everyday-life experience: In most cases they encompass omnipresent threats, affecting people deeply and are not likely being displaced voluntarily. Worries about health, unemployment, instability of primary networks, hazardous mobility, these and similar ubiquitous risks I like to title ›omnipresent, pervasive risks‹, insofar as they affect the personality as a whole.

Coping with risks, people tend to ›normalize‹ and understate - willy-nilly - everyday-life's risks. Some of them are held as unavoidable and acceptable. Concerning social and technological risks, the public tends to refuse responsibility and often claims ›zero-risk! Subsequently, to a considerable extent, industry and politics were made responsible for regulating, controlling and reducing such hazards. In the public's eyes however, these institutions fail handling risks in a reliable way, and as a consequence, people express little confidence in institutions and their protagonists. Maybe this loss of trust could also be caused by insufficient risk communication and rights to participate directly, when risk-related decisions are to be made. Improving risk-management, communication on risk and fulfilling the public's demands for direct participation could increase the acceptability of social and technological risks within the public.

The disparity of risk semantics derived from qualitative and standardized data, corroborates the necessity to integrate different methodical strategies, to obtain valid knowledge on risk perception: standardized, listwise questions as well as ranking of risks and open questions - best combined with qualitative interviews. Only multimethodism seems to guarantee valid and comprehensive understanding of public risk perception and evaluation.

**Keywords:** Risk perception, qualitative research, Baden-Wuerttemberg Risk Survey 2001, risk semantic

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