

»Risks as Perceived and Evaluated by the General Public«

Michael M. Zwick
University of Stuttgart
Sociology of Technologies and Environment
zwick@soz.uni-stuttgart.de

Abstract

While experts use an exact definition of risk, calculated by its probability multiplied with expected losses, the lay persons base their risk perception on qualitative heuristics.

On the one hand, these heuristics rely on specific characteristics, known as ›psychometric risk characteristics«. For instance, risks tend to be dramatized when they show high catastrophe potential, if the damages are thought being awful, irreversible and fatal, when risks are forced on, if people assume a negative balance of benefits and detriments, if they feel lacking personal control, or they perceive an unequal distribution of benefits and detriments, if the public is not familiar with new and not well known risks, if future generations are particularly affected, and so on. Dozens of such qualitative risk characteristics are known; our list contains only some of the most important ones.

On the other hand, the perception, valuation and acceptance of risks depends on the special context in which risks occur: If risks are ›close«, and people feel particularly exposed, if there is few trust in governmental risk prevention and control, if risks become amplified by media coverage and interest groups, if people feel helpless in the face of hazards and are excluded from political decision processes, risks will be evaluated pejoratively and the people's willingness to tolerate them will be small.

To a moderate degree the willingness to tolerate risks depends on an individual's value orientations. Technocrats, for instance, hint to high gains related to hazardous technologies and risky economic behavior, while those alternatives who feel sceptical to societal modernization claim abstention of consumption and tend to prefer absolute protection of environment and health combined with the demand for ›zero risk«! In contrast to lifestyles and value orientations, socio-demographic characteristics have lost nearly all of their power to explain risk tolerance.

Since risk is more than an objective analytical variable but always reflects the people's preferences, public participation seems to be necessary if political decisions on risks are to be made. Experts may contribute much knowledge about hazards, they may warn of underestimated and calm down of overestimated risks, they may develop appropriate strategies of risk prevention and risk management. Their expertise however ends, when the public's preferences are on the agenda.