

**6<sup>th</sup> sem. Hons., CC-14,  
Concept of Risk Perception  
Study material prepared by Surajit Let**

## **Risk Perception**

What is a risk? In the natural sciences the term risk seems to be clearly defined, it means the probability distribution of adverse effects, but the everyday use of risk has different connotations (Renn, 2008). In most social contexts, "risk" refers to the likelihood of an adverse effect resulting from an event or an activity, rather than an opportunity for desired outcomes. The two terms, hazards and risks, are often used interchangeably by the public. Here we review the risk perception research but in relation to natural hazards.

How are risks perceived? Knowledge, experience, values, attitudes and feelings all influence the thinking and judgement of people about the seriousness and acceptability of risks. Within the social sciences however the terminology of 'risk perception' has become the conventional standard (Slovic, 1987). Yet risks cannot be 'perceived' in the sense of being taken up by the human senses, as are images of real phenomena. The mental models and other psychological mechanisms which people use to judge risks (such as cognitive heuristics and risk images) are internalized through social and cultural learning and constantly moderated (reinforced, modified, amplified or attenuated) by media reports, peer influences and other communication processes (Morgan et al., 2001).

Risk perception is the subjective assessment of the probability of a specified type of accident happening and how concerned we are with the consequences. To perceive risk includes evaluations of the probability as well as the consequences of a negative outcome. It may also be argued that as affects related to the activity is an element of risk perception. Perception of risk goes beyond the individual, and it is a social and cultural construct reflecting values, symbols, history, and ideology (Weinstein, 1989).

Risk perception is understood as the 'awareness' of risk, which differs among societies. Poor countries with other pressing problems do not attach too much priority to disaster mitigation. General level of awareness among people regarding the significance of disaster mitigation and preparedness is also quite low. Consequently, there is less interest articulation for policy inputs in this area. On the other hand, risk perception is found to be quite high in the developed world where much effort has been put in disaster mitigation efforts, though vulnerability is low as compared to developing countries

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Everyday risk perception is considered being fundamental for the behavior towards risks and for the decision to take preventive measures. In order to develop effective information and risk communication strategies, the perception of risks and the influencing factors should be known.

Risk perception among others is an important determinant of the behaviour towards risks, e.g. for the decision to take preventive measures. If risk perception of people living in risk prone areas is known, effective information strategies on protective measures can be designed. Risk perception research in the domain of technical risks has shown that (affected) peoples' perception of risk is subject to many influencing cognitive, personal, situational and contextual factors (Sjöberg 2000a). Because of its complexity, it is very difficult to deduce general statements or a general theory of risk perception. Nevertheless, knowledge about the risk perception of persons living in risk-prone areas is relevant whenever risk management strategies are to be developed or applied.

Here risk perception is defined as an everyday subjective assessment process that is based on experience and on available information without referring to reliable data, series and complex models. Individual, subjective risk judgements are often called intuitive to emphasize that major parts of the underlying processes pass unconsciously. In more sociological terms, risk perception is a construction process embedded into and determined by society and culture. Risk judgements therefore imply value judgements. "Risk perception is all about thoughts, beliefs and constructs." (Sjöberg 2000b: 408) In this construction process, possible consequences or outcomes (negative and positive), possible cause-effect relationships, and situations experienced are attributed to hazardous events, situations or activities. Risk here consequently is defined not in mathematical or technical terms, but as a multidimensional concept that comprises subjective "quantitative" assessments based on experience and information as well as perceived or attributed "qualitative" risk characteristics within a certain social, cultural and historical context (Renn 1995).

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**FACTORS**

It has been stated that Risk Perception depends on the following four specific factors (Coburn, Spence & Pomonis., 1994).

- Exposure: actual quantitative risk level, as articulated through risk assessments.
- Familiarity: personal experience, which makes one alive to the dangers of disasters.
- Dread: horror of the disasters' scale and consequences, which makes policy imminent.
- Preventability: belief in prevention methods, which leads to disaster mitigation policies.