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Slovic, P. 1987. "Risk Perception." Science, 236: 280-285.

This paper looked at psychometric approaches to evaluating risk, and how psychological effects cause laypeople to evaluate risks. Often, these evaluations differ from that of an expert. Definitions of "risk" differ between average people and experts, with experts focusing more on annual fatalities. Average people also often view risk levels of certain activities as too high, which the author represents as a market failure. One of the reasons for this discrepancy in perceived risk is the psychological effects of well-publicized accidents (e.g. Three Mile Island), and how these effects may be signals of future events. The author concludes by suggesting that previous psychometric analyses can be used to predict the public's risk tolerance towards similar activities and technologies.

I was very surprised by the expert's evaluations of risky activities (Table 1), although they made more sense once I understood that the metric for evaluating risk was a body count. I would like to see this table updated to reflect some of the geo-political changes of the past 20 years (for example, I imagine that nuclear power would be considered less risky, while sexual activity and terrorist threat might increase). I also wonder if the low risk tolerance is still a defining factor of American society, as it is presented by this author in 1987.

Kasperson, J. X. and R. E. Kasperson. 2001. "Border Crossings."

This chapter looks at the impact of risky behavior on or around national borders, and how the effects of transborder risk impact social and economic decisions. With pollution as a primary example of risk, it argues that more powerful countries are more likely to set up polluting plants in position where the waste will travel downstream or downwind to less powerful countries. Distrust between nations can also spur negative exportation of pollutants and risky materials. It then provides case studies and potential and generic ways of managing transboundary risks.

One point I agree with is that the move towards a global economy and global electronic communication can lessen the impact of transborder risks. As communication increases, the opportunities for stealthily exporting waste across borders will diminish and a more productive shared economic model may emerge.

Lofstedt, R.E. 1996. "Risk Communication: The Barseack Nuclear Plant Case."

This paper examines the Danish response to an information campaign conducted by a nearby Swedish nuclear power plant. The author found that the efforts by the Swedes to assure the Danes that the plant was safe failed for three reasons: lack of trust in the Swedish government, lack of Danish control of the facilities, and a perception of arrogant actions by the plant operators. One interesting outcome is that many Danes put trust into Swedish technology but not their policy makers, and that political attention to minor problems can cause media attention to increase, which in turn increases attention on the parts of the public and pressure on political figures to respond.

One interesting point I noticed was that only one respondent felt that the Barseack plant was unsafe because "nuclear power is unsafe." This indicated to me that without the accidents that prompted this study, there would be much less concern over the plant's location. I wonder what the results would be if such a study were conducted in the U.S., where perceptions of nuclear power have long been tied to the threat of nuclear war.

Lofstedt, R. E. and V. Jankauskas. 2001. "Swedish Aid and the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant."

Similar the Barseak study, this chapter examines a poll conducted amongst Lithuanians concerning a Swedish nuclear power plant. It focused specifically on the differences between the opinions of policy-makers and the public. It found that Lithuanians were much more concerned about environmental issues than many policy-makers predicted, and that Swedes and Lithuanians were both primarily concerned with local environmental issues. There was also a concern about equity among safety distribution, since both Swedes and Lithuanians would benefit from the project.

I think that this type of empirical study has merit, although I don't know that the findings should be generalized to the national level. For example, there was significant concern on the part of the Malmo respondents concerning exhaust emissions and acid rain, but this is probably not a major concern of all Swedes. More care could be used in presenting the specificity of this study.